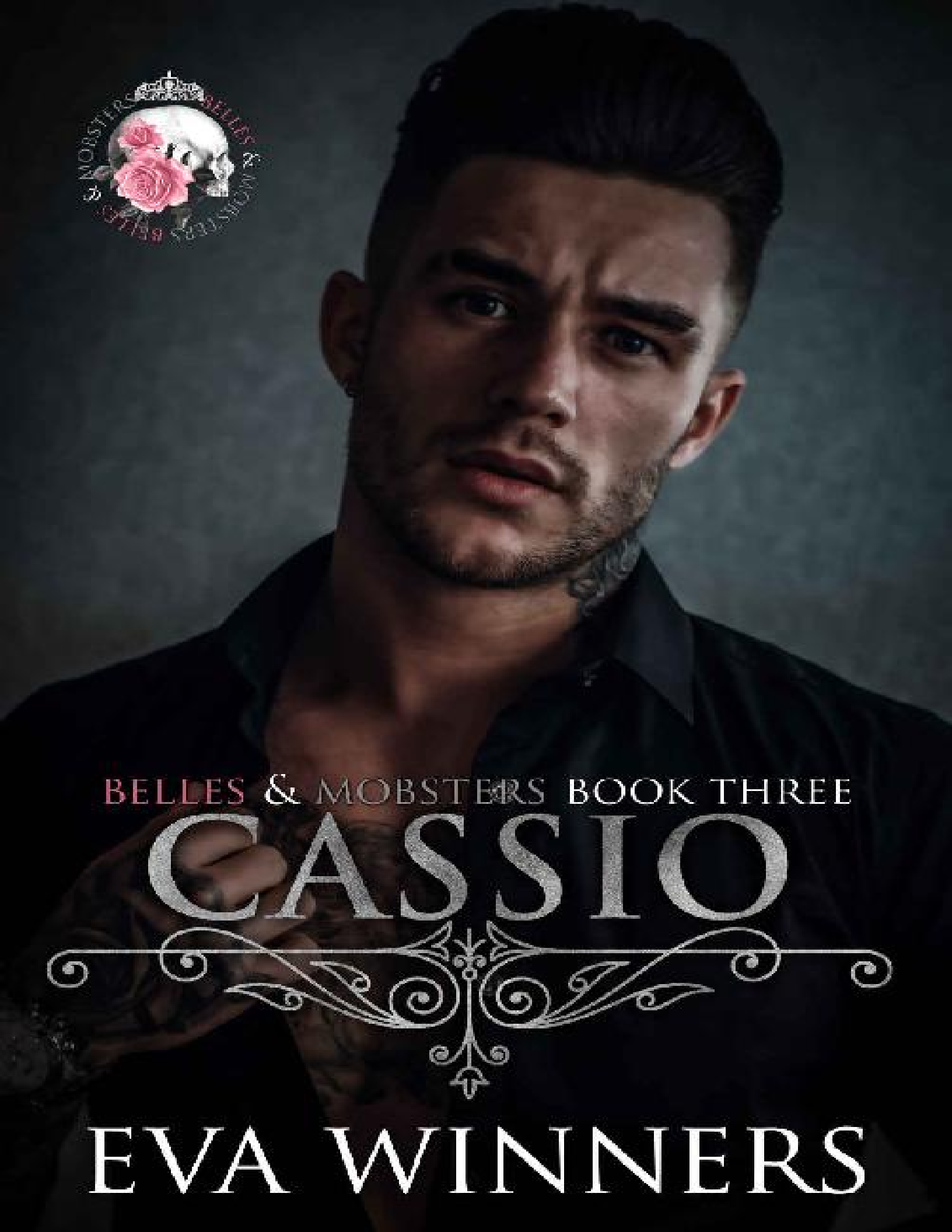
BELLES & MOBSTERS BOOK THREE
CASSIO
EVA WINNERS

CASSIO

Belles & Mobsters Series Collection

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EVA WINNERS

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To my daughters, love you always and forever. You are my reason.

To my Happy Hour Ladies – you help me keep my sanity. What happens at the happy hour, stays there. Right?

To all my family and friends – thank you!

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Belles & Mobsters Series Collection
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Each book in the Belles & Mobster series can be read as a standalone.

If you'd like a preview to the Belles and Mobsters Alexei, Book Four, make sure to keep reading and check out the prologue after the ending of Cassio.

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PLAYLIST

IF YOU'D LIKE to hear a soundtrack with songs that are featured in this book, as well as songs

that inspired me, here's the link:

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5cxtMk8yonR8dYFRFeR16A?si=qtdJ2IkxQHyM7aFPOXPZuw

In no particular order…
"Ocean Eyes - Billie Eilish
"Gateway Drug" - Bebe Rexha
"Bad Bitch" - Bebe Rexha
"Do re mi" - Blackbear
"Scars to Your Beautiful" - Alessia Cara
"Him & I" - Halsey, G-Eazy
"Too Good To Be True" - Faith Richards
"SexyBack" - Justin Timberlake, Timbaland

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PROLOGUE

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Cassio - Nine years ago

"Where the fuck is she, Cassio?"

Luca, my brother, was weary. I couldn't blame him. We didn't do favors for the Irish regularly. But this one seemed important to Callahan and the fact that he came to me begging for the favor spoke volumes. Let's just say that having the head of the Irish owe me would be priceless. And my brother and I would need the favor returned any day. We needed alliances if we were to become stronger, and this seemed like a good place to start.

Our father, Benito King, could decide at a moment's notice, he no longer needed us. I was under no illusion that he'd eliminate us without a second thought. After all, it wouldn't be the first time he tried.

Keep your friends close. But keep your enemies even closer. My nonno's favorite saying. It was only thanks to him that Luca and I survived. Luca was still a kid the first time my father attempted to have us killed. The greedy bastard thought Nonno would give him a free pass to his resources in Italy.

He didn't count on Nico Morrelli killing his scout and helping me kill the rest of the men he sent after me. It was the year things started to turn for me. I forged friendships with men that became lifelong friends. Luciano Vitale and I grew up together, but Nico Morrelli and Alessio Russo

made us even stronger. Raphael Santos and Alexei Nikolaev fit right in with our mission. One day, we'd burn this motherfucking flesh trading business to the ground and my father right along with it. In order to succeed though, we'd have to make alliances with Bratva, Irish, Italians, cartel… all of them. Unknowingly, Callahan opened up an opportunity. As long as we all stood against trading women like cattle.

"Are you sure this is not a set up?" Luca hissed. I couldn't blame him for being paranoid. Having Benito for a father would do that to you.

"Yes," I deadpanned; though truth be told, I had nothing to base it on. Except my gut feeling. But I couldn't say that to Luca. He'd blow a gasket.

Luca was only five years younger than me and patience wasn't a virtue he held at all. And gut feeling wasn't something he relied on. At twenty-five, Luca was almost as tall and strong as me. We were both hired killers, usually sent to eliminate people. This mission, unlike most previous ones, was to rescue, not to kill. It made him antsy.

Time was running out on us. Our helicopter wouldn't wait forever. This was supposed to be an in and out job. The elevated terrain made it hard to land on the Armenian Highlands mountain chain, Mt. Ararat being part of it. It was the reason we couldn't ambush these bastards and had to come in loud and clear via helicopter.

This territory of Turkey, almost on the border of Armenia, was pretty much lawless. It was used as a transportation hub between Asia, Africa, and Europe for smuggling girls. I'd know; my father participated in that shit.

Luca's eyes darted around, expecting an ambush. We heard shouting outside, our guys keeping them distracted so we could sneak in. It was mid-May and as hot as Hades here, and the heat amplified this place's stench tenfold.

The sounds of crying and screaming traveled down the tunnels; disgust and rage boiled in my blood. There was no mistaking those were all sounds of trapped women. All of us in the underworld were sinners, but it took a special kind of low to delve into human trafficking. That my own family participated in that kind of shit made me feel a special kind of low too.

“This place makes me sick,” Luca gritted. *Ditto,* I thought silently.

Luca didn’t question me when I told him I took this assignment, but I knew he thought it was stupid to work with the Irish. I didn’t think so. The old man, Callahan, was too shaken up when he asked for help. I wasn’t even sure what possessed me to agree to it. It wasn’t as if the Callahans were our friends. There was a reluctant truce between his family and ours, and they hated all the King family members, regardless if we worked with or against Benito. It was risky to do this, but the leverage it would give us was worth it.

Truthfully, it piqued my curiosity to know why a man like him would give a damn about some girl that was kidnapped. He didn’t give me much. It couldn’t be a member of his family. He had no children of his own. His nephews didn’t have any children, and he said the girl was around fourteen but that would mean that his niece was too old, at sixteen, to fit the bill. The description he provided didn’t resemble Margaret Callahan at all.

I’ll find out soon enough, I thought to myself.

Callahan was so desperate to save her, he promised me a debt of my choosing… one to be paid whenever I decided. Whoever this girl was, she was valuable to him.

Women’s whimpers came from the end of the tunnel, and it took all I had not to follow it so I could handle it. But we had a mission, rescue the girl and get her back safely. Once that happened, Luca and I would be back. No

questions asked. We couldn’t just pretend we did our part and move on as if there weren’t women left behind here.

“Is this the cell?” Luca asked, bringing my focus to this situation. I scanned the area with my eyes and glanced at the map. Yes, this was it. Our intel indicated she’d be in this cell and there was nobody here. Leaving without her, dead or alive, wasn’t an option. Callahan was clear… he would pay the debt only if we brought the girl back home. Regardless of what shape she was in.

A young boy, about fifteen, came around the corner, and both Luca and I pointed our guns at him.

“You look for the girl? Fire in her hair?” he asked in broken English. “English?”

Interesting description, I thought. Callahan gave a basic description, fourteen-year-old girl, red hair, blue eyes, and a birthmark on her upper left shoulder. A birthmark in the shape of a butterfly.

“Where is she?” Luca spat. “You better speak, before I blow your fucking brains out.”

“Easy, Luca,” I calmed my brother. He was just a kid, although he had a shotgun hung over his shoulder. This world was different from ours. “Can you show us where the girl is… the one with fire in her hair?”

He eyed us warily and I kept my eyes firmly on him. Danger came in all shapes and sizes. We couldn’t afford to lower our guard, but we wouldn’t be trigger happy either.

“Follow,” he replied and turned to go down the left corridor.

“It could be a trap,” Luca stated the obvious under his breath.

We had two choices. Either leave empty handed or follow the lead. Something was nudging me to follow through, find the girl. I wasn’t sure what it was, but it almost felt like my life depended on it. I scoffed at that. It was more that I wanted to reap the benefits by cornering Callahan into an open-ended debt.

I followed, the sound of Luca's curses behind me as he followed along too. We walked through dark corridors. Both of us kept our eyes and all our senses alert. It wouldn't do us any good to have Callahan forever in our debt if we were dead.

Finally, the boy stopped and pointed his head towards the door. I inched carefully and glanced through the small iron bars on top of the wooden door.

Holy fuck!

That was the first thought as I saw a young girl crouched into a ball in the corner of the room, rocking back and forth. Her knees pressed against her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs, and her face buried between them, she rocked as if she tried to soothe herself. I couldn't see her face, but now I understood why the kid called her a girl with fire in her hair. An abundance of red curls hid her face, the colors of a burning sunset. Just like fire.

She looked fragile. Callahan said she was fourteen, but it was hard to tell. Even from here, I could see her legs were covered in ugly bruises.

"Can you open the door?" I asked the boy.

Luca still had his gun trained on him, in case he tried something stupid. The boy's eyes darted to the wall next to the door, and I followed his gaze. There was a key hanging there, and without question, I grabbed it and shoved the old fashioned key into the lock. The door was a heavy wood, probably dating back a hundred years. It was meant to keep soldiers behind them, not women or children.

As soon as the lock sounded, the girl's whole body startled and her head snapped up.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Luca's furious voice reached behind me.

Blood was smeared all over her face, a big gash against her temple, her lip split, and a purple bruise marred her right cheek. What the hell did they do to her? She looked

like she had been beaten badly. Fury and rage boiled inside me, but I controlled it, to ensure I wouldn't scare her.

The moment her eyes connected with mine, all the oxygen left me. She was just a kid, but her eyes… those breathtaking, bruised, big blue eyes dominated her heart-shaped face. There was so much pain in them, my heart actually clenched. I had seen death, killed my fair share of men, caused pain and destruction to a lot of them, but nothing had ever gotten to my blackened heart. The pained look in this girl's eyes just about brought me to my knees.

She eyed me warily… resignation in them. She was a fucking kid. What have they done to her?

"We are here to help you," I spoke softly. "I'm Cassio. This is my brother Luca." Her eyes remained on me, unmoving. She didn't trust us. "Callahan sent us."

No recognition, no movement. "We came to take you home."

I slowly inched closer with each word.

Her tongue swept over the cut on her bottom lip, then she bit hard into it, causing blood to trickle down her chin. She didn't ease the bite, and I worried she'd bite her lip off.

"I don't want to see anymore," her voice was hoarse, as if it hurt her to talk. "P-please, don't make me."

I had no clue what she was talking about. I swallowed hard and emotions I had never felt before threatened to come to the surface. That should have been my first clue. My heart never moved. For anyone. I was a stone cold killer, ruthless against my enemies and cold towards everyone else.

After all, it was the reason the underworld was scared of me and my brother. Cross me once and you were dead. None of this bullshit with second chances. Those kinds of sentiments got you killed.

"We are taking you home," I said firmly, shoving my heart that felt for this girl to the back burner. I had to remind myself soft was not who I was.

She didn’t move, and I took another step towards her.

“I want my mom,” she murmured, her ocean pools tempting me to drown in them. A piece of my heart cracked at her admission. No kid should go through something like that. Luca and I endured beatings from our father and had seen cruelty from an early age. We were used to it; this kid was not.

Goddamn it, I didn’t need this now.

“She wants you too.” I kept my voice low and soft. “We’ll take you home. Can you walk?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a lollipop. It was a habit I’d had hard time getting rid of. When Luca and I were kids, if our father decided to beat us, it was the only thing that made Luca feel better, so I always kept one on hand. I extended my hand with it, and her eyes watched my outstretched hand and the lollipop as if she was scared that if she reached for it, it would disappear.

“It’s okay,” I urged her on. We really had to get going, but I didn’t want to cause her more pain or scare the shit out of her by picking her up without her consent. God knew what she endured here. “Take my hand.”

She reached out, her wrist at a weird angle that told me it was broken. Her hand shook badly as she slowly, painfully slowly, reached for mine, revealing blue and purple bruises all up her arm too. I gritted my teeth to stop curses from leaving my lips. The last thing she needed was my fury. Although I tempered it, she still sensed my rage because her reach faltered and fear flashed in her big eyes.

I closed the gap and our fingers touched. “Let’s go home to your mom.”

She gasped softly in surprise. “You feel real,” she whispered, her voice shaking. She took the lollipop, but I could see the pain that crossed her features as she picked it up.

“That’s right,” I told her. “We’ll get you out of here.”

Rage rolled off Luca, but I was grateful he kept his emotions at bay. This kid needed us to get her out of here, not rain our revenge on these assholes. Though I'd be sure to come back and burn this place down after I rescued the rest of the women and children here.

She placed her small blood covered hand in mine, and I wrapped my fingers around it. A slight wince crossed her face, and I cursed myself for not being more careful.

"Can you stand up?" I asked her.

She went to move her legs pressed against her chest and slowly she stretched them over the little corner bed. I noted whip marks on her legs and felt myself shake with rage. As if she felt it, those beautiful blue lagoon eyes raised up to me.

"You are doing good," I soothed her, forcing a smile.

Wincing, she stood up and pain crossed her face. She was badly hurt. There would be no way she'd be able to walk, even less run out of here.

Luca and I locked eyes, both of us having the same exact thought.

"What's your name?" I asked her, keeping my tone gentle. I wasn't sure if I succeeded. I honestly couldn't remember the last time I used a calming, soothing tone towards anyone. Probably my brother when we were kids, but that was a long time ago.

Her eyes turned wary again, and I wondered what she was thinking. "My mum didn't give you my name?"

It was the first time I detected a light accent in her words. I frowned. It was British. Callahan never stepped foot outside the U.S. Who was this girl?

"I've never met your mother," I explained. It wasn't her mother that hired me. My sixth sense was telling me she didn't know Callahan. "A mutual friend of hers and mine asked me to help."

Although, I had no idea why. Callahan and I weren't exactly friends. Something about this girl seemed familiar,

but I couldn’t quite place it. It was hard to think seeing the beaten state she was in. I wanted to punish all that had caused her this pain, regardless that she was nothing to me.

“Butterfly,” I started. Great, I already gave her a nickname. “My brother, Luca, will carry you so we can get out of here fast.” I was a better shot, so he’d have to carry her.

“No,” she whimpered. Her whole body started shaking, her eyes big with terror and her fingers squeezed mine tight although I was sure that caused her pain. The lollipop slid to the floor, but she paid it no attention.

“You can’t walk like this,” I tried to sooth her.

“You carry her,” Luca suggested in a low voice. “You have her already; just lift her and let’s get the hell out of here.”

He was right. I was surprised we didn’t have men swarming this place already. Without another word, I grabbed the lollipop off the floor, then scooted her up into my arms effortlessly. She weighed barely anything. I knew the movement hurt her even before the whimper left her lips.

“I’m sorry,” I told her in a soothing voice. “I know it hurts. When we are safe, we’ll get you a doctor.”

She shut her eyes, her breathing slightly shallow.

“I’ve got you,” I murmured softly, ensuring I had a good grip of my gun and could maneuver my right hand with her in my arms.

“Is there another way out?” Luca asked the kid. “Show me a way out, and I’ll give you American dollars.”

He nodded and instead of going back the way we came, we carried on down the cave hallway. I prayed to God this kid delivered; otherwise, we’d all be dead. Suddenly, getting out of here alive meant more than ever before. This girl deserved to live.

True to the kid’s word, we found a way out.

“Give the kid money as promised,” I told Luca. Hell, if I had my entire bank account at disposal right now, I’d give it to this kid.

Luca handed him a roll of hundred dollar bills. “You shouldn’t go back there, kid,” he told him. I wasn’t sure if he would or wouldn’t.

“Let’s go,” both of us started running.

I glanced down at a small body in my arms, covered in blood and bruises. Her eyes were still squeezed shut, as if she hoped everything would go away. Luca glanced her way several times, his lips pressed in a thin line. This girl still wore her school uniform.

How long was she here for? I recalled Callahan stating she had been missing for a week, but this girl looked like she’d been beaten for a month straight.

“There it is.” The helicopter was still here, thank God.

We sped up, running.

“Just in fucking time,” the co-pilot shouted. “Those bastards were shooting at us.”

“Thank you for waiting,” I told him. He probably saved all of our lives by waiting. “Let’s go.”

His eyes shifted to the girl in my arms, taking inventory of her state.

“Fucking sick bastards,” he muttered with fury.

I should have put her in her own seat and buckled her in, but she shook so bad, I didn’t have it in me. So I buckled us together. Maybe I was going for the award for the caretaker of the century? Fuck if I knew, but nobody had ever brought out this protectiveness within me before. I was protective as hell of my little brother, but that didn’t even scratch the surface of this feeling. It was fucking scary as shit.

The pilot glanced back and saw us violating the safety by sitting together, but the moment his eyes traveled over her, he remained silent about it.

“The prime minister’s daughter?” he asked, shock coloring his voice and disbelief in his eyes.

That’s right!

No wonder she looked familiar. She was the British darling, a little celebrity in political and social circles. She had been in the U.S. news a lot. Her mother was the daughter of an old political family that had connections to the Irish mafia. I bet it was how this rescue mission came to be.

“Butterfly, can I check your shoulder?” I asked her in a low voice. Callahan didn’t give me much of a description but the butterfly birthmark was one clear designation of our rescue target. Shame on me for not checking before now. This was how much she rattled me.

She met my eyes and again I felt oxygen drain out of my lungs. How was she doing this to me? Giving me a curt nod, I unbuttoned the top button only of what used to be a white blouse to her uniform, then peaked at the back of her shoulder. Yes, there was a butterfly birthmark there.

“Thank you.” The fact that she let me do that spoke volumes to me. Either she trusted me greatly or she feared me greatly. Neither was good. I buttoned her shirt back up and held her tight as we left the wretched place behind.

As soon as the helicopter landed twenty minutes later, we continued towards my luxury private plane that was waiting for us. Callahan sent a message two days ago asking permission to wait with the girl’s mother in my plane. We had been in the field for the past two days, studying the ins and outs of that fucking hole and the guards’ schedule.

Fuck, that should have been my clue this girl was important. Callahan never left the U.S., and now he was in the Middle East with the mother of this girl. What was the story here?

As I climbed down the steps with the girl in my arms, the wife of the prime minister came out meeting us halfway.

“My baby,” she cried out, her trembling hands reaching for her. Her mother was pale, the terror written all over her face. I imagined the days and nights since her daughter’s abduction were a nightmare. I recalled stories of the several miscarriages blasted all over tabloids before they finally had a daughter, an only child.

Her daughter looked nothing like her mother. Her mother was in her forties, had dark hair, dark eyes, and olive tone skin. Actually, recalling the image of the prime minister, this girl didn’t look anything like her father either.

Callahan showed up at the door of the plane, his eyes on the two women. His face was an unmoving mask, although I detected anger boiling underneath it all. He met my eyes and nodded. The acknowledgement of his debt.

No wonder he didn’t have qualms about undefined debt. The prime minister would owe him a significant favor, probably a lifetime of favors, for this.

“Baby,” she whispered, tears spilling down her face. Her fingers traced her daughter’s bruised face. “It’s Mom.”

Her daughter opened her eyes, searching out for her. My eyes traveled to Callahan, and for a fraction of a second, his gaze shattered as he watched mother and daughter.

“Mum,” she cried out in a low, shaking voice.

“Let’s get in and get going,” Luca told her mom, delaying their reunion. He was right, we had to leave this country as soon as possible.

Glancing down at this young girl, I spoke softly. “There is a full bathroom here. Want to get cleaned up?”

“Y-yes, please.”

With her mother on my tail, I strode into the back of the plane where the luxury bedroom was and went through the door to a full bath with a sauna in it. To this day I never understood why I was persuaded to buy a plane with a full blown bathroom and sauna, but I was thankful for it now.

I slowly sat the girl down onto the closed toilet lid and her mother wrapped her little body into her arms.

“I am so sorry, baby,” her mother murmured against her hair. “I am so sorry.”

“Your mom will stay here so I can talk to the pilot and get us going,” I was careful to keep my voice soft and low. “As soon as we are in the air, we’ll get the shower going.”

She nodded, just barely. Her face was a striking mixture of blood and bruises against her fair skin. I wanted to go back and bomb the place, make all those men that made her hurt like this pay.

I stood up, ready to leave, watching in the mirror as her mother crouched next to the girl with tears streaming down her face.

“I got you, baby,” she murmured softly to her daughter, wrapping her arms around her daughter.

Her mother didn’t see her daughter wince upon receiving the hug. I wouldn’t have caught it either if I wasn’t watching their reflection in the mirror. Despite the pain, she leaned against her mother. Maybe it was good that her mother came. This kid would need her now more than ever.

Upon entering the main cabin, I saw Luca gulp a glass of whiskey down and then pour himself another one. Seeing me, he poured another glass and handed it to me. I needed it; we both did.

“Fuck,” he muttered as he gulped another glass down.

Callahan sat stiffly, his eyes focused out the window. I bet he was going down the list of items he’d make the prime minister do for him.

I pushed the intercom. “Get us out of here,” I told the pilot.

“Roger that,” he retorted and the engines roared to life.

“You good, brother?” I asked him. We’d both done and seen plenty of fucked up shit, but certain things were harder to see than others. Seeing this girl today was

definitely one of the harder things. I knew the same was true for my brother.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I will be. But will she?”

Loud sobs broke out in the other room, and I wasn’t sure if that was the answer. I heard Callahan’s teeth grind and his jaw clenched, ready to snap.

There is a story there, I was sure of it. *Who is this girl to him?*

“It’s okay, my baby,” we both heard the mother soothing her daughter. “You are safe now.”

The wretched, soft sobs that followed were a hard punch in the gut. My heart twisted for her and the pain she undoubtedly felt. Her cries echoed through the plane, and I could see it was hitting Luca and Callahan in the worst ways.

“Callahan, did the prime minister give you this job?” I questioned him. His jaw might snap at any moment.

“No, the girl’s mother did,” he answered after a heartbeat of silence. I was surprised to hear that answer. So where was his leverage?

“Does the prime minister know that she reached out to the head of the Irish mafia in the U.S. to retrieve her daughter? It is career suicide.” We all knew it was. If this got out, regardless of the reason for it, his opponents would bring him down.

Callahan shook his head in response.

“Why do it then?” I questioned him. “Save the girl, get indebted to me, and get nothing out of it?”

“Her mother and I grew up together,” he replied, his voice tired. “She should have been my wife, and that girl should have been my daughter. That is reason enough for me.”

Another heart wrenching sob tore through the plane and Callahan winced. The tough fucker actually winced. People feared him, cowered in front of him, ran from him, and he looked like he was being torn in half now. I couldn’t blame

him though. Hearing those sobs cut deep into my heart too. And I had barely any heart.

“I-I didn’t say anything, Mum,” the girl stuttered through her sobs, her voice shaking with fear.

“Don’t worry about that.” Her mother’s voice was shaking too.

“Mummy, I-”

Her sobs got harder and my hands curled into a fist. I wanted to punch something. The pain I heard in her voice was gutting me from the inside. Luca refilled all our drinks without another word.

“Listen to me, my love,” her mother’s voice was like a leaf in the wind. “Whatever happened, you shove it away.”

I heard gagging and some shuffling, the sound of glass crashing. Instantly, all three of us ran to the back of the plane, into the bathroom suite that was part of the bedroom.

I got to the suite right first, on time to see the kid getting sick into the toilet, her body convulsing and shaking. Her mother was a mess while her daughter’s body retched, trying to dump the contents of her stomach but probably not having much in it.

“Baby,” her mother was rubbing her back, her voice a whimper. The woman was trying hard to remain strong for her daughter and failing miserably. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” The whispered, broken reply was barely audible, her ember-flamed hair covering her face as her forehead lay on her forearm leaning against the toilet seat. “I didn’t say anything.” Her small body shook, and she repeated. “I didn’t say a word.”

I wasn’t sure what she was trying to say. Not sure if I wanted to know. I could see her mother was at a loss too.

“What do you mean, baby?” The way her mother asked the question, I got the sense she was scared to get an answer.

The girl's body retched again. In her state, I worried how much pain she was causing herself. If a hug hurt her, this was ten times worse. She gagged and threw up again, nothing but acid.

"Baby, please," her mother's words were barely a whisper. "Please calm down."

"I said nothing," she whispered through her soft sobs. "They- the men… " her throat was bobbing as she tried to swallow hard. "I said nothing," she repeated, whispering. "I-I didn't save them."

Callahan came up to them, clenching his fists. Luca stood beside me, ready to lose his shit and punch something, and I… all I wanted to do was take this girl's pain away and then go back and torture every single one of those motherfuckers.

Heavy silence fell over the room. Her mother pressed her hand against her mouth, silencing her whimpers. She was desperately trying to be strong for her daughter that was falling apart in front of our eyes.

"That's behind you now," her mother attempted.

"I didn't say a word to save them," she repeated desperately again, agony in her voice. "I should have tried… I didn't say a word."

She was fourteen for Christ's sake.

I vowed once the mother and daughter were dropped off safely wherever they were going, I would return. Those men would regret ever laying their eyes on the women. Luca and I locked gazes. No words were needed, he nodded and we knew we were coming back.

The mother cried, her own body shaking. She stood up and buried her face into Callahan's chest. Fuck that! She should take care of her daughter, be strong for her. This kid had been to hell and back; she needed her mother now.

I shot a glare in her direction. Callahan caught it and there was warning in his eyes. Yes, this fucking man cared

for this woman still. What did he think he would get with her? She was the prime minister's wife, for Christ's sake.

I took a step forward and knelt onto the floor, putting my hand on the girl's back. The motion felt unfamiliar, clumsy. My hand was too big and too rough to offer comfort. I couldn't recall the last time I offered it to anyone.

"Listen to me," I started softly. Hopefully, I was doing this right. I didn't want to cause more trauma to the poor kid. "You have bruises and cuts, but you are going to be okay," I told her. "You are strong. Those men are cowards. They will die."

Her body stilled, and I could have sworn she held her breath.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

Slowly, she lifted herself and sat on her folded legs. My hand was still around her. After everything she had been through, I was scared to let her go.

Her bruised, deep blue eyes met mine, her split lip trembling as she asked. "Will you kill them?"

I heard her mother's sharp gasp, but right now, nobody mattered but this hurt little girl.

"Every single one of them," I vowed.

One heartbeat passed. "Good."

Yes, this girl was strong.

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Chapter One

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CASSIO

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Nine Years Later

For nine years, it has been one shit show after another. My friends, my brother, and I have been focused on building alliances, instilling fear in our enemies, establishing our territories and names. Luciano, Nico, Raphael, Alessio, Luca, Alexei, and me.

These men have been by my side every single day for years. They had my back, and I had theirs. This alliance we had built was one of the strongest around, and my father had nothing on this. But we paid a big goddamn price. Nico lost his sister. Luciano lost his mother and sister. His wife too. I wasn't even sure if she was alive, though he was certain that she was. The whole thing with his wife might have been his last straw.

Nico, Luciano, Alexei, Luca, and I were all outside the warehouse in New Jersey, one of Luciano's docks. We had seized another shipment of women. Raphael was our inside guy to the Santos Cartel and the only reason we were able to intercept the cargo before these women got into Benito's clutches. Raphael's father was a cruel prick, participating with my father in trafficking women and selling them like cattle.

It was safer that Raphael was nowhere near this state when we went after the shipment. So he was currently in Florida, feigning ignorance, while we tried to figure out

what to do with these women now. They ranged from ages fourteen to forty. It just fucking churned my stomach.

Our father tainted Luca's and my last name. Good men looked down on us when they learned who our father was, so did the crooks. No matter though; we had good friends. The kind that endured similar experiences and hardship. They were our friends for life.

The women thought us heroes for saving them and killing the men that held them prisoners since they were captured. We weren't heroes, just a slightly different caliber of criminals than human traffickers. The women didn't want to go back to their homes, claiming the Santos would hunt them down and find them. They'd be right back enroute to whorehouses. There was no guarantee that Raphael would get a heads up again.

"I could have Sasha take him out," Alexei said. In unison, all of us turned to look at him.

"Can you be more specific?" I asked him. "There is a list of people we want to take out."

He flipped his blade back and forth, his whole body stoic besides the blade and his one hand. Alexei could be unnerving. He wore his ruthlessness on his sleeve. Like a badge of honor. Combine that with ink on his face and Artic cold eyes, he gave off psychopath vibes. It didn't bother me, because he was loyal. To his family and to his friends.

"The old Santos," he answered. "Raphael hates the bastard." He flicked his knife.

Alexei hated him too. It was his story to tell, but it was the old Santos who failed his birth mother. It was the old Nikolaev witch, Vasili's and Sasha's mother, who destroyed Alexei's life as a boy, and, as if that wasn't enough, she ensured Alexei was handed to a fucking monster.

"Won't Vasili lose his shit?" I questioned him. I hadn't met Alexei's newfound brother yet, but I heard plenty about him. Nico had a run in with him while his sister attended Georgetown. Vasili Nikolaev wasn't a man I wanted as my

enemy. I'd rather form an alliance with him. He ruled New Orleans and the surrounding area and was quite powerful. Having him on our side would prove helpful. But he preferred to run his own show, which was fine. At least he ensured no smuggling of women happened on his territory.

Alexei shrugged. "Vasili won't know." I raised my eyebrow. "Sasha has wanted to take him out for a while. It won't take much to nudge him and get it done."

"Shouldn't we at least give a heads up to Raphael?" Luciano muttered. Raphael deserved that much, though I wasn't sure if he despised his father as much as I hated mine.

"No, you shouldn't," Alexei retorted dryly. "Let's see first if Sasha even bites. He's on the crazy side, so you never know which way he'll go."

I shook my head. The crazy was up for debate here. We all had some of that shit in us. But the moment we started keeping major secrets from each other, we'd break the alliance.

"If Vasili gets wind of this, it'll be a strike against us," Nico chimed in. "We can't have him as our enemy, and if he gets on Benito's side-"

"He won't." Alexei sounded very certain about that.

"What makes you so sure?" Alexei wasn't the type of guy to screw someone over.

"Because he can't stand the bastard," he muttered. "He'd rather cut his dick off than ever side with Benito." I could tell by Alexei's expression he was telling the truth. With his big, tall frame and those tattoos on his face, people feared him without even knowing what he had done in life to survive. I didn't give a shit about any of it. My past crimes were right up there with his. But as long as we did it with some kind of scruples, maybe there was a shred of a soul left in us that wasn't completely black.

"If we do this, we do it the right way," I told Alexei.

“Agreed. Let me feel out Sasha’s state of mind, and I’ll get back to you. No need to ruffle feathers if he’ll follow Vasili’s law.”

Nico shook his head. “How about we put a wager that the crazy motherfucker jumps and kills him the same week?”

“I’m game,” Luca spoke for the first time. “I also want to make a wager that Raphael will kill Sasha and possibly Cassio if he finds out we started this shit. That’ll be fun. Gummy bears, popcorn, soda, and a fight to the death.”

Nico snorted immediately. “More like a gundown. Can we add root beer floats to the snacks?”

“Fuck you two.” I flipped them both the bird. My younger brother was a fucking pain in my ass sometimes, and Nico was too smart for his own good.

Luca grinned, like the damn maniac he was, flipping me the middle finger right back. “Raphael will fuck you up.”

“Okay, you two fuckers,” Luciano broke up our sibling arguing. “We have to figure out what to do with these women.” He was right. They were more important now.

Nico shoved his hands into his pockets. “I can have ten of them situated with Gia’s shelter. There isn’t enough space for more than ten.”

Nico’s housekeeper, Gia, was a victim of trafficking. Nico saved her quite a few years back. But she endured years of some serious shit, and the only way she was finally able to heal was by helping other women that went through similar experiences.

“Shit, it would be good if we could put them all with her,” I muttered. “Keep them together.”

With a pensive look in his eyes, I could practically see him working it out.

“Maybe we can double them in rooms for a week or so until we can expand the building,” Nico responded.

He was typing vigorously on his phone.

“I know you’re good,” Luca scoffed at him. “But expansion in a week? You’re not that good.”

Nico cocked his eyebrow, a smug look in his face. “Challenge accepted,” he deadpanned. “What are we betting?”

“Aren’t you fucking rich enough?” Luca spat back at him.

“I’m not talking about money,” he drawled.

“Then what do you want?” Luca questioned him. He better watch out or he’d end up owing his life to Nico. Nobody matched Nico’s IQ.

“A favor,” Nico responded. “Any favor, at any point of my life that I want it.”

“Don’t do it,” Luciano warned Luca, sharing an amusing glance with me. He knew as well as I did if you told Luca not to do something, my reckless little brother would do it. “You’re gonna lose.”

“He lost already,” Alexei chimed in, his tone untelling whether he was amused or not.

“Deal,” Luca announced. Sucker!

Nico grinned like a shark. The two shook hands and Luca was forever indebted to Nico. A cell phone beeped and all of us glanced at our phones. It was Nico’s; he got a reply.

“Okay, Gia will take them,” Nico announced. “I’ll have my construction team work on building expansion, but until then, Gia said she can accommodate them.”

“Excellent,” Luca said. “Now, let’s go and celebrate. Shall we hit your club in the city, Cassio?”

I shook my head at my little brother who wasn’t so little anymore. He was always up for a celebration, though there was very little to celebrate lately.

“Temptation?” Nico questioned. “Isn’t there a Halloween party or something?”

“In fucking August?” Luciano grumbled.

I shrugged my shoulders. “The event manager is doing some shit cramming all the year’s events into this month. Next week it’s a Christmas party.”

Luciano and Nico promptly called the event manager a moron, rolling their eyes. It didn’t matter whether they liked it or not; the parties attracted everyone to my clubs so the event manager was doing something right.

“No Temptation for me,” Alexei’s cold tone interrupted Luciano’s creative names for my event manager who didn’t even know he was on the mobster’s name calling roster.

“Yeah, Temptation is too soft for me too,” Luca replied. “But when Cassio refuses to open something more risqué, you just have to settle for temptation.”

Alexei calmly flipped him off and we all chuckled.

“Go open your own hard core sex club,” I told Luca. “You kinky bastard.”

Luca grinned like a fool. “I might. And call it Cassio.”

“And I just might beat your ass,” I warned him amusingly.

Three hours later, Luciano, Nico, and I strode through the VIP entrance. Luca was already inside, probably hooking up with some random chick.

“I’m too old for techno,” Nico muttered begrudgingly.

“You and I both,” Luciano muttered. “I guess Cassio wants to get his dick wet.”

“And you don’t?” I challenged my best friend. Except for a small obstacle. Luciano couldn’t stand to look at another woman. His wife was his vice, though I wasn’t certain whether it was in a good way or bad way. She had disappeared and he’d been hunting for her ever since.

We barely made it inside the club when a small body slammed right into the back of me.

“Oh, shit,” a soft voice murmured. “I’m so sorry.” A light nudge, a push forward as if she wanted me to hurry up, and I grunted my displeasure. I didn’t budge because I didn’t

come into my own club to be shoved around by a woman. “You think you can speed it up, buddy?”

Nico choked a laugh then covered it with a fake ass cough.

I swiveled around to put the woman in her place when my eyes connected with deep ocean eyes. Those unforgettable, stunning blue eyes.

My steps halted and I stopped dead in my tracks, staring at a girl… No, not a girl. A woman. Jesus, what a woman! Talk about a man’s wet dream. A beautiful soft body, fucking centerfold-worthy, and eyes that could take your breath away.

A soft groan and an eyeroll brought me back to the situation at hand. A woman dressed in a sexy Wonder Woman costume stood in front of us, boots and all. Not a sight you see every day.

“Buddy, I said to speed it up, not slow it down,” she said exasperated. Luciano chuckled next to me, though he tried to hold it in. It has been a while since I heard him laugh.

Another soft goan. “Oh, come on,” she mumbled. “At least move out of the way.”

The three of us, Luciano, Nico, and I, took up the entire hallway, and she kept shifting left and right, trying to wiggle her way between us to pass through.

“Are you in a rush, Wonder Woman?” Luciano challenged with a smirk.

“As a matter of fact,” she snapped, glancing over her shoulder. “I am.”

Her red mane, colors of the most magnificent sunset, swished around as she turned. Christ, there was so much of it. I could practically envision wrapping it around my fist. I clenched my hands, or risked reaching out to feel whether it’d feel as soft as it looked.

“Miss, get back over here!” One of my bouncers came rushing down the hallway. She must have snuck in.

Her head turned back in the direction she came from, her hair throwing off a flaming glow each time she moved her head, even under the dim lights of the hallway.

That hair!

I have only seen that shade of red hair once, and I'd never forget it. I'd recognize it anywhere. Yet, it was hard to believe that the girl I saved was here. In front of me. As a grown woman.

And the most magnificent woman I had ever seen.

She pushed her hand through her hair, slightly tilting her tiara adorned with a red star.

"Nice tiara," Nico mocked, in his cold voice.

Her hands came up to it. "Thanks. It is also a weapon," she told him, fixing it back straight. "Kills men that annoy me."

My lip tugged up. She was no longer a helpless, young girl. Just as I predicted, she turned out strong. There was fire beneath all the exterior that matched that incredible mane of hers. The temptation to see how hot she burned was strong. And then, I wanted to ignite it into a full blown inferno.

"Miss," the bouncer called out again.

"Just go back to your post," she yelled his way, flinging her hand to shoo him away and at the same time trying to get through our three big bodies. The way she was doing it almost looked like she was trying to avoid brushing against us.

"Miss." The bouncer was barely ten feet away by now.

"Umm, I'm with these guys. Right?" Her eyes came up to me, mischievousness sparkling in them. *Áine Evans*. She had grown up, but I'd recognize her anywhere. "Play along," she whispered under her breath. "Please."

Gosh, she could say *please* in that soft tone and I'd burn cities for her.

"It's okay, Alan," I told my bouncer. He stopped, eyeing her as if he didn't believe me and he'd lose his job any

moment. “The lady is with me.”

Surprise flashed in his eyes, but he quickly masked it. After all, I never brought women to my club. There was only one place I took them, to my penthouse that I only used for fucking. I never slept there, nor stayed there. Just like my brother, relationships weren’t for me. I had a roster of women I used for release. An honest and simple agreement was set upfront. Nothing sweet and vanilla. No lovemaking. Both sides knew what was expected and when that no longer worked, we parted ways.

“Oh, okay.” He heaved a deep breath of relief. “Why didn’t you just say so?” he mumbled under his breath, annoyance flashing in his eyes. “Make me chase you all this way.” Alan’s eyes came to the three of us. “And the other girl? The Black Widow girl? She with you too?”

“Yes. Yes, she is,” she answered him, grinning wide and nodding her head in confirmation. “No need to hunt us. Go search for someone else.”

Alan’s eyes came to me for confirmation, anxiousness in his gaze. Jesus, I couldn’t believe after all these years, she was right here.

“Right?” she asked nervously, sending me a fleeting gaze as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. I nodded. I guess the party crashers came in duos. “See,” she returned her attention to Alan. “No need to fuss.”

Alan grunted something under his breath and then satisfied that he did his job, went to take his leave.

“Oh, hey Alan,” she called out after him. Alan turned back around weariness on his face. His one hand came to the back of his neck as he stared at her again, long and hard. I should really find Alan a better suited position. He was a good man but way too serious. “There will be three guys coming soon. Good looking, Irish brothers.”

Luciano, Nico, and I shared a glance. This was going unexpectedly.

“Yeah?”

Even in the dark hallway, I could see her full red lips curve into a smile. “Don’t let them in. Under any circumstances.”

“Are they bothering you?” Alan inquired, concern lacing his voice. He had a protective streak about him, especially when it came to vulnerable women. It was the reason I liked him.

She waved her hand. “No, but they are party poopers.”

His eyes came to me again. I nodded in agreement. Then he shook his head and left us to get back to his job. I let out a soft laugh as my gaze roamed over her body. This was the most surprising rendezvous I’ve had in years.

My eyes locked on the woman that nine years ago made me believe I could make a difference. And since then, with the friends and alliances we’d forged, we all started working towards one common goal.

Saving women. Eliminating the men that used and hurt them.

If I ever wondered whether we made a difference, all I had to do was remember this girl. She grew up into a stunning woman. *A Wonder Woman*, I thought amusingly. Just like the costume dress that hugged her curves and left her toned legs on full display.

She was short, five foot five and next to my six-three she seemed somehow small and delicate, almost fragile. But underneath it all, there was strength. I could sense it today even more than nine years ago.

“Thanks for that,” she spoke softly, a smile curving her full lips.

Her eyes roamed over Luciano and Nico and something deep within me was agitated that she was even looking at them. So unusual. I squashed jealousy a long time ago and found it to be a useless feeling.

Then finally her gaze settled on me. *Like it should, only on me,* I thought silently.

Our eyes locked and the depths of her ocean pools hit me right in the chest. Just like they did all those years ago. Her eyebrows furrowed and she tilted her head, studying my face. There was no recognition in them, just confusion.

“You look familiar,” she uttered in a whisper, almost as if speaking to herself. “But I never forget a face, so it can’t be…” Her slim fingers raised and started massaging her temple.

Did she not remember?

“What’s your name?” I asked her though I knew it. She wasn’t someone I could ever forget. I was damn sure to look up her family after she was safely in the hospital all those years ago.

She shook her head, as if she was trying to clear her head and a smile came to her lips.

“Diana Prince,” she retorted. Really? She was going all out with her character, huh?

“Okay, Wonder Woman. Do you have a name outside your character?”

She chuckled.

“I don’t think so, buddy,” she murmured softly. *Buddy?* “My mum always warned me about talking to strangers, especially the ones that don’t dress up for Halloween costume parties.”

Nico and Luciano chuckled behind me. Glad they were amused.

“Áine!” A woman’s voice traveled over and I grinned. “Jesus, I thought they got you!”

I glanced in the voice’s direction and saw a woman dressed in Black Widow costume. Margaret Callahan. I recognized the niece of the head of the Irish mafia.

I guess these two young ladies were going for a superhero theme.

“And we have your name,” I announced smugly.

Annoyance flashed in Áine’s eyes that her name just got blasted. My lips curved into a smile. I’d have to thank my

brother Luca for insisting to celebrate nothing in particular, though he disappeared before we arrived. Tonight had just gotten better.

Dismissing me, Áine strode around me towards her friend. “You are the worst accomplice,” she told her. “And the worst party accomplice. You never leave anyone behind. Don’t you know the saying, *‘no troll left behind’*.”

The reference made no sense to me. I’d have to look it up. Her cousin’s eyes came over to us and she threw her head and laughed.

“Seems you managed. And we are not trolls.”

Áine smoothed her little dress, glancing down at herself. “Let’s go join the party,” Áine announced. “More clubs should do Halloween in August.” I gave a pointed look to Nico and Luciano. “The best part,” she beamed. “The boys won’t be coming into this club.”

They shared a glance then grinned, trouble written all over their faces. I wondered if Callahan knew his niece and Áine were crashing my nightclub. Obviously the boys, I assumed she meant Margaret’s brothers, knew it. There would be no mistaking that they knew the nightclub, Temptation, belonged to me. It was the first nightclub I had ever purchased.

Áine glanced over her shoulder, our eyes connecting. “Thanks again, buddy!” She winked, then strode away into my club.

Buddy! Fuck no, I would not be her buddy.

“Hey, *buddy*,” Nico teased. The two disappeared from our view, and I was left with Nico’s smirking face. “Sounds like a dog’s name.”

“Fuck you, Nico,” I muttered. My eyes darted in the direction Áine had disappeared, and I had half a mind to go after her.

Luciano must have read the look on my face because he just shook his head and muttered, “You shouldn’t fuck with redheads. Trust me, I should know.”

I hadn’t met Grace, but from what little Luciano had shared, she was a redhead. He couldn’t stomach them anymore. He couldn’t stomach *any* woman anymore.

“I’m guessing you know the woman?” Nico questioned, a knowing look in his eyes. “Though it doesn’t look like you left a lasting expression on her.”

Luciano snickered with amusement.

“Fuck you both. I’m gonna get you back for this one of these days.”

“Not likely,” Nico smirked.

The three of us headed into my office where the music could be heard, but it wasn’t as loud and the large glass wall gave us a view of the entire dance floor.

“Why in the fuck did we even come here?” Nico muttered, throwing himself onto a chair and lifting his legs onto the table. “Aren’t we a bit too old for this? And where the fuck is Luca?”

My line of sight was out the one way window watching the scene on the dance floor. And there was my *little* brother, schmoozing on the dance floor, women buzzing around him like he was goddamn honey.

None of them mattered. Didn’t they realize both my brother and I were beyond repair? Maybe it was exactly what the women were looking for. Bad boys with fucked up pasts that they thought they could save.

I sought out the woman with the flaming hair. It didn’t take long to spot her. She was dancing with Margaret. They were laughing, the two acting like they were in their own world. Having the time of their lives.

Unlike Áine, Margaret’s hair was black as coal but they had similar color eyes, the striking colors of the Caribbean waters. Fuck, when Áine’s eyes connected with mine those ocean glimmers hit me straight in my chest. And I felt *something*.

For the first time, in a very long time, I *felt* something in my chest. Different from the responsibility for deaths and

suffering my father caused. Different from the hunger for revenge. Except, I couldn’t quite pinpoint it.

My eyes roamed over Áine’s body, curved and soft in all the right places. Yet, also strong. The Wonder Woman costume was a good choice. It suited her. She had grown up, the traces of the kid I rescued gone. The young girl from all those years ago had become a strong, confident woman. It was evident in her every move, her every smile, her every look.

Something about her tugged at me, and it felt important that I followed through.

Why doesn’t she remember me at all?

We didn’t spend days together but a traumatic experience like that you didn’t just forget. She was old enough to remember it all. After all, kidnapping and going through an ordeal like that wasn’t something that was easily forgotten. That single event left an enduring impact on me.

It stayed with me. It drove me on the days when tearing down my father’s empire seemed to come at a great cost. To me, my brother, my friends.

The knowledge that there could be another little girl, like Áine Evans, waiting for us to right the wrongs my father had done. Just like we had with this girl nine years ago. A beaten and bruised little girl had survived and prevailed. It was the best incentive possible to continue our work.

My eyes locked on her form, her movements on the dance floor elegant and sensual. She moved with confidence, her smile wide and free. A glimpse of her skin between her boots and ridiculously short Wonder Woman costume was smooth and pale. Her cherry red hair attracted the attention of hungry men's eyes and jealousy stirred in me.

Jealousy.

The feeling I hadn't felt since Luca and I were children; my brother barely a toddler and I barely old enough to understand how our mother died. The slithering, fickle feeling that I always hated when seeing others with their families. I had the urge to claw it out of my body. It made you hurt; it made you feel all the things you wished you had but didn't.

"Are you just going to stare at her?" Nico questioned. I flipped him a bird. *Taunting fucking asshole!* "Go ask her for a dance," he suggested.

"I don't need any encouragement," I snapped, agitated. It was exactly what I wanted to do, except I wasn't sure if it was something I *should* do. After all, it was my own father that kidnapped her nine years ago. It was our family's legacy, our family's greed that started a chain of events that had landed her in that dirty cell in the middle of nowhere. Where screams and pain were a normal, everyday occurrence.

Luca and I went back afterwards. We leveled the compound to the ground after we freed other women and interrogated the men. Okay, maybe a more adequate term would be tortured. Either way, not a single soldier survived to tell the tale. *Except for the boy.* The state we found women in made me scared to even imagine what the kid went through. Some fucked up shit happened in that hellhole.

My eyes focused on her dancing form, moving on the dance floor with her dark-haired cousin. The Irish and my father had been at war for as long as I could remember. But over the past nine years, the war escalated. My father couldn't have even fathomed what he started when he kidnapped Áine Evans back then.

But after all this time, I had finally decided it was time I collected my debt.

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Chapter Two

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ÁINE

This man was beautiful; like Adonis but on a badass level.

Time seemed to grind to a halt and my gaze was frozen on a set of cold, dark eyes, framed with the thickest lashes I had ever seen. The sizzling power that surged through him, ran intense and undefinable; the darkness and brutality in those dark eyes shaking something inside me.

A memory.

A distant and vague memory that I couldn't quite hone in on. It lurked in the shadows of my mind that only haunted me in my dreams. An odd thumping began in my chest, in sync with my head. Yet, the usual repulsion at man's nearness never came, which was intriguing.

His dark eyes watched me, like he was waiting for something. As if we knew each other from a very long time ago. I took in his face and strong jawline with chiseled cheekbones. He seemed… *familiar*. Very familiar. A foggy image flashed in my mind, an extended hand, and I furrowed my eyebrows.

Tattooed hands. My eyes lowered to his hands. Nothing on his right hand, but there was ink on his left hand. A rose, just petals.

And then the memory was gone, disintegrating into nothing, much to my frustration. I focused my mind in search of the memory. It was important, I knew it. Yet, nothing came. I shook my head in a light frustration and met his gaze. *Who is he?*

My temples throbbed as I stared at those intense dark eyes. It felt like drowning in the dark, threatening waters with no way of coming up for air. His face was memorable. If I saw him before, there would be no chance I'd ever forget it. He studied me as I watched his soulful brown eyes. Like he knew something I didn't. It intrigued me, pulling me into a fog.

Everything faded as I watched him. Yes, there was something familiar about him that I couldn't place. I'd stake my life that I'd met this man a long time ago. I searched my memory, the puzzle nagging at me. It felt important that I remember. But the harder I tried to recall the memory, the worse the throbbing in my head became. I didn't realize my fingers were pressing against my temples until Margaret's voice pierced through my brain.

"Áine!" Margaret's voice interrupted my staring and his lips curved into a lazy smile. "Jesus, I thought they got you!"

I glanced at Margaret and shook my head in response.

"And we have your name," the guy covered in tattoos murmured with satisfaction.

His deep voice sent shivers down my spine. It was most uncharacteristic for my body to react positively to any man, yet this one… God, this enigmatic one made me react in a shockingly visceral way. I could practically taste the air sizzling and feel my skin heating. It was as thrilling as it was terrifying. I never, like *ever*, felt desire for anyone.

His lips curved into a knowing small smile and annoyance flashed within me at his victorious smirk. Whatever! I wouldn't let him ruin my evening. Besides, I'd be smirking last if Jack Callahan, my stepfather found his

way in here. Then this guy probably wouldn't come near me with a ten foot pole. Men were either repulsed by my connection to the head of the Irish mafia in New York or intrigued. There was no in-between. Nobody remained unfazed by it.

I left the dark Adonis with my hand in Margaret's to grab some alcohol. For the first time in my life, I fought the urge to rip a man's clothes off and have sweaty, rough sex.

I haven't even started drinking. Even more disturbing, I *never* wanted to have sex. Never have had sex. It usually brought out the most unflattering panic attacks, cold sweats and an instant, painfully racing heart.

With a small shake to my head, we strode away. Yet each step away from him caused a deep tug in my stomach. It was pulling me back in the stranger's direction. It made no sense at all. Yes, he was an unusually attractive man. It would be impossible for any woman not to feel some fluttering in her stomach - or heart - gazing upon that fine specimen. But unlike other women, one touch by him, and I was certain the panic attack would make its annoying appearance. Despite this strong pull, knowing the panic attacks I get when touched, I ignored it.

I'll probably die a virgin, I thought with a heavy sigh.

"You are the worst accomplice," I told her, rolling my eyes. Maybe I was slightly cranky because of this clawing need for the stranger. "And the worst party accomplice. You never leave anyone behind. Don't you know the saying, *'no troll left behind'*."

Margaret chuckled unperturbed. We both knew she always had my back, and I always had hers. We were as close as sisters and trusted each other explicitly.

"Seems you managed," she scoffed, her eyes traveling behind us. "And we are not trolls."

Incorrigible. Margaret was just incorrigible.

"Let's go enjoy the party," I told her with a last glimpse over my shoulder. Just one last look at such a gorgeous

specimen. He still stood in the same spot, his eyes on me. And there went my heart again, fluttering like a butterfly caught in a bottle trying to get free. Turning back to Margaret, I added in a teasing tone, “More clubs should do Halloween in August. The best part. The boys won’t be coming into this club.”

I couldn’t resist one last glance over my shoulder, our eyes connecting. “Thanks again, buddy!” I winked flirtatiously, shocking myself. I wasn’t the flirty type. More like the killer type.

Turning my attention to Margaret, we shared a grin and off we went. We both had responsible jobs and ran an organization that came with heavy responsibility, but we also liked to party. After all, we'd only be in our twenties once.

Rushing over to the bar, we ordered our shots. Downing one each, we headed onto the crowded dance floor.

We danced, relaxed and happy not to have Margaret’s brothers hovering over us and pushing all men away. Not that I wanted any men. Most of the time I hated men being near me, never mind touching me. Though my earlier encounter surprised me.

Maybe my body was just waiting for the right guy to respond to. A rush of excitement shot through me thinking back to the magnetic stranger. My eyes traveled over the dance floor, searching him out, but he wasn’t here and disappointment washed over me.

I had no idea who he was, but somehow, he felt important. There was something electric about him. Those tattoos on his neck and his hand would usually turn me away, but on him, they just fit. Almost like a second skin.

No man had ever commanded my attention but that one… he was like a dangerous king, capturing all my awareness and at the same time; he felt familiar. Comforting. Safe.

Beautiful and ruthless.

Those were the two words that came to mind to describe him. The reckless part of me that I never experienced before wanted to test how far I could go with him before my body would shut down. Eventually, it *would* shut down and that old, familiar panic would claw its way to the forefront. I had no doubt. But the curiosity in me wanted to test those lustful waters… only with *him.*

I glanced next to me and noted Margaret had snuck away. I had no doubt she'd have something wild to tell me later. I was a tiny bit jealous of her free spirit. Sometimes I wanted to be able to just hook up with a man and enjoy the spur of the moment, passion. Except, with me it always ended up with a sudden rush of terror.

Lovely! I am every man's dream.

The music switched and I danced by myself, swaying to the beat. The familiar tunes of Halsey "Bad At Love" played and goosebumps crawled over my skin. It was exactly what I was. Except I didn't have a boy in Michigan. Or anywhere else.

Closing my eyes, I let the music wash over me, letting go of all other thoughts. There was plenty of time for worries, fears, and insecurities. Right now, I just wanted to dance and pretend there was nothing wrong with me.

I was Wonder Woman on the dance floor. The costume wasn't very practical, but it certainly made me feel badass. Though nobody wore it as good as Gal Gadot. And sexy. I'd never felt sexy before.

Hands slipped around my waist, and my heart rate instantly sped up. It went into overdrive. The familiar smell and fluttering feeling in my stomach told me who it was. I didn't have to turn around to know. Still the cautious part of me had me glancing down to see ink on the hand wrapped around me.

Oh my God!

And still no panic. On the contrary, I felt a rush of lust like someone shot an injection of it into my bloodstream.

It was wrong; I knew it. I wasn't a one night stand kind of girl. But when you finally feel something after so many years of hearing your girlfriends raving about sex, I couldn’t help but to give into the temptation to be touched by a stranger.

My body warmed and my heart drummed, feeling his hard body at my back and his hands on me. A craving unlike anything I’d felt before rose with powerful intensity within me. It was intoxicating. *He* was intoxicating.

*Maybe I **am** normal*, I thought with excitement. Just my body was extra, extra selective.

The song switched and Faith Richard’s “Too Good To Be True” came on. I wanted to see him again, get lost in those eyes. With bravery I hadn’t felt in a while, I slowly turned around and met his gaze. Holding my breath, I waited for my body to react, protest, scream. *Nothing!*

Just a pleasant hum and tingling warmth all over. Nothing resembling a panic attack. It was indeed too good to be true. I exhaled slowly. It felt so good to feel all these *normal* emotions.

“Well, well,” I said, smiling and hiding my inexperience at this. “It’s the guy that doesn’t dress up for a costume party.”

His beautiful mouth curved into a ghost of a smile and my thighs clenched. Gees, did my hormones decide to kick in tonight after years of nothing? No complaints here though.

Just that little hint of a smile on his handsome face and every fiber in me jolted, then ignited into something feral and hot. My visceral reaction to this man shocked me.

“I am dressed up,” he drawled, his voice a deep timbre that sent shivers down my spine. The woman in me cheered and rejoiced at this novel reaction. My pussy wanted him. *Oh, my freaking God!* There was something in my brain that chanted *mine, mine, mine* on repeat.

“Dressed up as what?” I asked in a slightly breathless tone.

“As me,” he murmured softly. “Is that not good enough?” My cheeks instantly heated. *He* was good enough.

“It certainly is,” I muttered, my eyes lowering down his body. *Oh gosh, I’m being too obvious*. The heat of his body just radiated right through me and into my veins.

My focus returned, seeing his lips curved into a full blown smile. He studied me with a grin and there was fluttering low in my stomach. Somehow, I sensed he didn’t smile a lot, but he should. His dark, brown eyes told of a hard past. Each time our eyes connected, I got a sense this man wasn’t a stranger, but I couldn’t quite place him. Maybe I had one too many shots, though I didn’t feel drunk. Besides, I felt it earlier too when I first saw him.

His hand slid to the middle of my waist, then reached for my hands. Our hands clasped for a few heartbeats, then he brought them around his neck. I held my breath and then slowly released it, my body still feeling relaxed. I felt drunk. But not from the shots I consumed. I felt drunk off of him, and he’d barely started dancing with me. I inhaled his luscious scent and my insides quivered.

The warmth of his body could easily become an addiction. I should talk, say something. Yet, I couldn’t find a single word. Instead, I soaked up this moment like a woman dying of thirst because I was certain it would end at any moment. Physical closeness has always been difficult. No idea why or how, it just didn’t work.

“You know wearing a suit is not a costume, right?” I blurted out. Wonderful, of all the things to say, I blabbed the most idiotic one. Even if my body, by some miracle, didn’t go into panic mode, this man would.

“Sure it is. A businessman,” he replied. I threw my head back and laughed.

“That is not a costume.” My eyes roamed over his three-piece Brioni suit again. It fit him like a glove. “Maybe a

mobster?” He raised his eyebrow and gave me a weird look. “What?” I asked defenseless. “You could go for an Al Capone look or something.”

The slightest grin lifted the corner of his mouth and my heart thundered under my ribs. I was wildly attracted to this man. I didn’t even know his name, but none of it mattered. It was as if everyone and everything disappeared, leaving me alone with him and this electricity that was a novelty to me.

Panic will kick in any second now. It had to; it always did. I didn’t want it to, but it was inevitable. Maybe I could touch him before it happened.

I threaded my fingers in the dark strands of his hair, touching the back of his collar. His hair was softer than I imagined. I wondered if his lips would be even softer.

A thought flickered in the back of my mind warning me this man wasn’t soft. Yet, he was thrilling. Exciting. I wanted to enjoy this moment for as long as I could before the broken part of me kicked in and rejected the close proximity of this gorgeous male specimen. I deserved that much!

He inched his face closer and the air sizzled with something intense. My breath hitched in my throat and languid heat rushed through my bloodstream, making my head feel light.

The air in the club was heavy, the music a distant noise in my brain as I danced with a man I knew nothing about. Not even his name. And there was something so enticing about him, I wanted to hold on to him for as long as I could.

“It’s a good look,” I murmured softly. “You could be a good mobster.”

Gazing into his soulful eyes, I felt like I could get lost in them. My heartbeat fluttered and my skin burned like I was too close to the sun. His hands on me felt good, but I craved more. It was like my body finally woke up from years-long slumber and demanded satisfaction.

The sweet spot between my thighs ached, the attraction like a drug through my veins. I imagined him slipping that tattooed hand between my thighs and over my sweet spot. Would his touch feel good, or would my body betray me? I wanted to test the waters.

Oh my gosh, my panties were on fire.

I bit into my lower lip, contemplating how to ask him to take me somewhere and touch me. Normally, I'd break a man's hand if he tried to touch me, but nobody had ever stirred a fraction of this sensation. Especially a stranger, but this man… something about him unraveled me. Shook me to my core.

His teeth grazed across his lower lip and warmth filled my stomach. I stared at his mouth, urging him silently to kiss me. I never kissed strangers. In fact, I rarely even initiated or returned a kiss when I had a boyfriend. A platonic boyfriend at best.

I just assumed I was broken and didn't like anything related to physical closeness.

We stared at each other and everything around us faded into background noise. He inched closer and my body buzzed while nervousness vibrated under my skin. The butterflies in my stomach worked in overdrive, and I held my breath.

His lips touched mine as "Scars To Your Beautiful" by Alessia Cara played, and somewhere far in my mind, I acknowledged it seemed appropriate. I have been bad at love, scarred somewhere in the depths of my mind that I couldn't even grasp or comprehend. Yet, right now, I felt whole. Perfect. *His!*

My heart raced so fast, I worried I'd lose my breath. My knees weakened at the sensations pouring into me, the press of his lips against mine soft. I rubbed myself against his hard muscles, our mouths a perfect mold together. Soft and wet. He slid his tongue inside my mouth and I thought I'd just turn into a puddle.

With this stranger’s soft and warm lips on mine, his scent overpowering me, I was lost. Every inch of my skin was on fire. For him! His one large hand moved down to my lower back, heat radiating through the flimsy material of my costume. His other hand grasped my face, his thumb under my chin, tilting my face so he could kiss me deeper.

A moan climbed up my throat. I couldn’t breathe. I heard nothing but the wild beating of my own heart in my ears. Felt nothing but him. The way he kissed was madness. It felt like being devoured and savored at the same time. He tasted of mint, fruit, and alcohol, the oddest but most intoxicating combination.

I kept waiting for the old ghosts to kick in. Yet nothing.

No panic.

No frozen fear.

Just pure, unadulterated desire.

He captured my top lip between his, kissing me with possession. Like he knew *me*; like he had been waiting for me his entire life.

My heartbeat hammered against my ribcage. His kiss made me feel alive; made me feel everything.

A tremor ran through me, but I refused to stop the kiss. Instead, my hands clutched at his nape, unwilling to let go. Like he was my life raft - difference between life and death out in the wild storms hovering over the oceans. I pressed my body harder against his, rubbing against him. All my reason out the door and instinct kicked in.

His tongue tangled with mine, guiding me, tasting me. This was new territory for me, yet there was no doubt this man knew how to kiss. He tasted like sin and heaven. The best kind of sin that would maybe get me kicked out of heaven.

The kiss turned rough, a scrape of his teeth against my bottom lip. My pulse drummed in my ears and fire rushed through my veins, consuming me. The world felt right with

his mouth on mine, my soft body pressed against his hard one.

I gripped his hair tighter, pulling him closer. *To devour me.* A groan vibrated from deep in his chest and his hands dug into my hips. Our tongues danced, as our bodies moved to our own tunes.

I felt consumed. Complete. Right.

Nothing had ever felt so right. He tasted so good. My breathing was erratic, my brain in a lust infused fog and between my thighs pulsed the gnawing ache that I knew he could satisfy.

My fingernails scraped against his scalp, needing him closer. I was desperate for more of this. For everything. His tongue tangled with mine; our kiss was starved. *Maybe he feels everything I do*, I pondered. There was no other way to explain it. He was consuming me in an unfamiliar way that felt so right. A shiver rolled through me, the throbbing ache between my thighs demanding to be sated.

He nipped my bottom lip and pulled back. My eyes snapped to him, ready to beg him not to stop. I was twenty-three and had never felt anything like this before. This kiss was everything.

“Come with me,” he rasped. He could be Lucifer dragging me to hell. I didn’t care; I’d follow him willingly.

His hand took mine, his palms rough against my soft skin. He led me to a hallway where we met earlier. People were dancing, laughing, but none of it registered as I followed him down the hallway and up the stairs. The only thing I was aware of was him.

We entered a room that looked like an office. It smelled like him, scotch and his expensive cologne. My eyes roamed over the luxurious but simple office.

His lips ran up my neck, pressing my body against the door.

“I’m going to lock the door so nobody surprises us.” A heartbeat of silence. “Is that okay?”

This kind of scenario was what I preached to my cousins and friends. Yet, here I was nodding my head in agreement. But God, he felt so good. I had to seize this opportunity when my body wasn't revolting at a man's touch.

"Yes," I breathed out.

The lock clicked, and for a moment, we stared at each other. As if he was giving me a chance to change my mind. To protest.

I took a breath in and released it slowly. I wanted him, there wasn't an ounce of doubt about it. My body didn't freak out, neither did my heart. What was it about him that made my heart drum so hard and my body hum with desire, yet made me feel safe? His presence alone chased away the dark shadows lurking in my mind to a dark, faraway corner where they no longer mattered.

He studied me with an intensity that matched my own. But he waited for me to make the final move. His eyes were on me, the hunger in them matching my own, telling me he felt this sizzling attraction too. Yet, he waited. For *me*.

Three heartbeats. And my mind was made up. I couldn't resist him. I reached out and thread my fingers through his dark waves and pressed my lips to his.

A soft groan left his throat before he grabbed me by the back of my neck and took charge. I knew he would. He kissed me hard, taking ownership of my mouth. *It is his*, a thought echoed in my mind. *It has been his for a long time.*

We kissed wild and rough, wet and messy. His tongue moved hard and fast, twirling with mine, owning me. It was perfect. I wanted him to keep kissing me, touching me. Whatever this was… I wanted more of it. His tongue licked every inch of my mouth, as if he wanted to taste every corner of it. His heat was wild and hot, engulfing me. His hands roamed my body, and at this moment, I was grateful the Wonder Woman costume was so skimpy. It allowed me to feel his touch on my skin, sending sparks straight to my core.

I melted into his embrace, his hands burning my skin in the best way possible. I should blush at what I was doing with a stranger, but I didn't care. It was my proof that I wasn't made of ice, that I wasn't broken.

I was starved for a man's touch. *This* man's touch. His hands came down to my breasts and palmed them through the flimsy material. A soft whimper escaped my lips and my back arched into his touch.

"Please," I breathed against his lips. *Is this it?* No wonder all my girlfriends and Margaret fussed over sex so much. I haven't gotten to that part yet, and I was delirious.

My lower belly clenched with need and the pulse between my thighs ached, begging for release. As if he knew my body better than I did, his hands slipped under my dress and pulled my panties down my legs. I stepped out of them and then he lifted me and sat my ass against a desk.

I placed my palms down on the desk to steady myself and his mouth clashed against mine again. Another moan vibrated from my throat and he swallowed it. Our tongues danced together like we'd done this a million times before. The fire that blazed within me was set to burn me into ashes.

His mouth moved down, trailing kisses down my neck and nipping at my skin. It was as if he was marking me. My head tilted back and my eyes fluttered shut, relishing in this foreign, yet addictive sensation.

My entire body was on the verge of exploding. Languid heat rushed through my veins, a delightful shiver running down my spine. He spread my thighs open and the stubble scratched the soft skin there. My eyes shot open with the realization of what he was about to do. I licked my lips, my breathing labored as I watched him inch closer and closer to my sweet spot. Yet, no panic.

Our gazes locked, his tongue trailing a path closer and closer to my entrance. I swallowed hard and held my

breath as my heart drummed in my ears.

He pushed my thighs further apart with his rough palms, and I watched with wide eyes. Waiting. Anticipating. Wanting.

His eyes lowered to my exposed thighs. His burning gaze caressed my clit without even touching it.

The ball of anticipation in my stomach coiled as I watched his gaze flicker back to me. Something raw and undiluted lurked in his dark eyes, spreading a thrilling rush through me.

“Fuck. You’re mine.” That was all he said before his mouth closed over my pussy. *Am I his?* The words rang true. Maybe nothing ever worked with other men because there was no room for anyone but him. In my heart, I’ve been waiting for *him*. My body waited for him.

I shuddered under the first, hot touch of his tongue. I couldn’t even contemplate his words further as a rush of pleasure flooded me and my head fell back. He took a slow, savoring lap from the entrance to my clit. It was the first intimate touch by a man, and it was better than I could have ever imagined it.

A loud moan slipped through my lips when he swirled his tongue over my clit before sucking it. His tongue worked me mercilessly, and I was so close to falling apart. Nothing had ever felt as good as this.

His tongue pushed into my entrance and a rough, throaty sound escaped me. He slipped one finger inside me and pleasure shot through me, burning through my bloodstream. On instinct, I tried to rock my hips, needing the friction to come undone.

“Butterfly, you are tight,” he murmured in a hoarse voice. The nickname pierced through my lust infused fog, but then his fingers started thrusting in and out of me, and everything faded. I could only chase this sensation he was giving me.

“Oh my God,” I breathed hard. “P-please. Oh my God.”

His mouth licked and sucked on my clit, while his fingers moved in and out of me, taking his time, like I was his most savored dessert. Every so often he made deep noises of satisfaction that shot something hot through every fiber of me. He fingered me faster and harder, his laps steady as his dark eyes found mine. Our eyes locked, incoherent words slipped through my lips as the flame within me grew hotter, threatening to send me spiraling into an abyss.

He curled his fingers inside me, hitting the spot then one word left his mouth.

“Come,” he ordered and pleasure exploded through my veins, like fire fed by gasoline. A languid heat spread through my body as I pulsed around his fingers, while he continued to slowly move them in and out until my shivers subsided.

His hands skimmed from my waist to my hip then to my inner thighs, his palm rough and hot. A burning caress. Heat curled in my lower stomach and my pulse raced as we locked our gazes.

“That was my first orgasm with a man.” His eyes flickered with surprise at my admission. Truthfully, I was surprised I said it out loud. Orgasms must be truth serums. The words slipped through my lips before I thought better of it. Though I didn’t regret it. It was amazing, and I wanted more.

He stood up to his full length and clashed his mouth on mine for the briefest second, letting me taste myself on his tongue.

He broke the kiss too quickly.

“It won’t be the last,” he promised.

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Chapter Three

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CASSIO

Her first orgasm.

I owned her first orgasm. Possession and something else shot through my veins. She had invaded the space in my heart a long time ago. She was the reason Luca and I kept going.

She was the reason I didn't give up when I was tired. She was the reason I didn't give up when I was beaten. I'd hear her words. *Will you kill them all?* And I'd keep going.

My little butterfly.

She had grown up. Matured. She had become a woman in the flesh who tempted me. Yet, I sensed something within her. Every so often, I could sense her tensing as if she expected something to happen, but it was gone just as fast. She'd relax, melt into me, and everything disappeared.

Mine.

She was mine. I had kissed her and the world would never be the same again. I let go of that battered little girl I saved all those years ago and kissed a woman. A warrior queen. She was a fighter because only a strong fighter survived the ordeal she had been through.

True, she didn't remember me. She was old enough to recall those memories, but somehow, she had buried them all away. I wouldn't make her dig them out. I'd remember

that horror for both of us. It was a small mercy for her to have forgotten all that.

I might have saved her from that hellhole, but unknowingly, she also saved me all those years ago.

She had made something inside me shift and restart. She gave me purpose when I couldn't find one. Even after Grandfather saved us from our own father, made us strong, both Luca and I struggled to find purpose. We didn't belong among normal people. And we sure as hell didn't belong in my father's world.

That day, amidst the heat, blood, and terror, Áine had given me purpose. A reason to keep fighting my father and hit him where it hurt him the most. But most importantly, to save women and girls like her.

That day nine years ago was a turning point in my life. Yet again, I found myself at another turning point. Once more, because of her.

A knock came at the door. Both Áine and I ignored it. A second later, the knock turned into a full blown banging.

"Áine, are you in there?" A slightly slurred speech traveled through the door. It had to be her cousin, from the sounds of it she was drunk, and I silently cursed. I wanted to give Áine a second and third orgasm. All her orgasms. I wasn't ready for this night to end.

"Friend of yours?" I asked her, though I knew. She looked beautiful. Her cheeks flushed from desire, her ocean blue eyes glimmering like oceans under the bright sun. She was easily the most intoxicating woman.

Áine smoothed her dress down then slid off the desk before pulling her panties back on. Her hair was wild and messy. I loved seeing her like this. Relaxed, unguarded, and pleasured. I couldn't resist running my hands through her fiery red hair, tangling my fingers in her strands. It was so soft, like the softest feather.

A sheepish smile appeared on her face. I kept forgetting how young she was. Maybe too young for me. Though there

was nothing on this planet that would make me give her up. *Mine.*

“Yeah, she’s my friend.” She rolled her eyes with a soft smile tugging at her lips. “She can be loud sometimes,” she added playfully, her voice melodious.

“Áine, I hear your voice,” Margaret Callahan banged on the door like a madwoman. “Jack and my brothers are here.”

All playfulness drained from Áine’s face.

“Oh shit,” she mumbled and strode to the door. Once she opened it, she glanced over her shoulder and our eyes met. Each time our gazes connected, her ocean blue eyes shattered me inside. Forget bullets, her one look hit me harder and deeper. And you didn’t need a Caribbean vacation, you could just get lost in her shimmering gaze and feel like you were in a tropical heaven. “I- I can come back if-”

She wouldn’t need to come back because I would come after her. Nonetheless, I nodded.

“Take a right and straight to the back, there are side stairs to the back entrance. I’ll see if I can distract them.”

A wide grin spread across her face. “Thank you. Don’t get in trouble with them though. Okay?”

I was a killer and she worried about me with her family. I wondered if it would be the case if she knew my identity. Yes, Jack kept her away from the underworld but there was no way that she remained oblivious to it. And the King name was not a favored name in most households.

“Let’s go,” Margaret pulled her away, slightly stumbling, and Áine disappeared from my view.

Somehow, I’d already missed her. I was far from done with her. My self-restraint was pulled taut, and it hung by a thread. I wanted to go after her, finish what we started. My cock was rock hard for her.

Yet, somehow, I knew we wouldn’t have finished it tonight even without interruption.

Call it intuition. Whatever you will. But deep down, although Áine might have wanted this, she wasn't ready. I was prepared to spend the night with a hard on from the moment I spotted her. Though tonight turned out much better than I'd anticipated.

I buttoned up my suit jacket and straightened my sleeves, then pushed my hand through my hair. I could still smell Áine's faint perfume on me and in the air around me, taste her on my tongue. It was best Jack didn't come in here.

I strode out of the office. With a quick glance to the right, I saw the women were gone. They couldn't have taken a detour and gotten lost. It was the same route Nico and Luciano took earlier in the evening. Both left shortly after we arrived. Luciano didn't have the stomach for these kinds of places since his wife's disappearance, and Nico was chasing some leads or something. The man was always working, but maybe it was the only thing that kept him sane since his sister's death.

I gave them both some bullshit excuse that I'd stay and go through the financial books. Neither one of them bought the story, leaving me with knowing smirks. Whatever. They didn't know crap.

I was almost at the end of the hallway when I spotted them. The Irish. I'd admit, sometimes they were too loud and too wild. It could be aggravating as fuck. But Jack Callahan was a good man and his nephews, while young and slightly on the wild side, were good men too. If only they weren't impulsive.

"Jack," I greeted him, feigning surprise to see him. "I didn't think nightclubs were your scene."

"They bloody are not," he grunted. "But Margaret and my step-daughter are here. And they told your bouncer at the door not to let us in. They need guards."

He was clearly displeased. And worried. I'd imagine he was always worried about them. Especially Áine Evans. He

thought nobody knew his secret, though it seemed clear as day.

“Your nephews are more than welcome to go check out the area,” I offered. “I’m on my way out, but stay as long as you like.”

He shared a look with his nephews, a clear order to go get the women. The three men strode away without a word, then split up. It would be a moot cause, but no need to give them a heads up on that.

“Cassio, can I have a word?” Jack asked, his eyes on me. The same ocean blue eyes as Áine’s, his daughter, except hers were stunningly beautiful. Jack’s were just… well, average. Those blue eyes were a trademark of the Callahans; it amazed me that nobody saw it as clearly as I did. Áine Evans was Jack Callahan’s biological daughter, though he kept it a secret from the world, including his own family.

“Sure,” I said. “Do you mind if we walk and talk?”

I certainly wouldn’t take him into my office. I’d keep that off limits for a while. Besides, I was certain he’d get a whiff of sex and Áine’s perfume. And Callahan’s temper was well known.

The moment we stepped out, the cool air hit us. August nights in New York city could be hot as hell, but today was uncharacteristically chillier and I wondered if Áine had a jacket. I’d hate for her to get sick; that costume of hers wouldn’t provide any heat.

Great! I was becoming like an old aunt nagging her ward to dress warm.

“Cassio, I have to admit, I expected you to name and claim your debt by now,” Jack started. I knew he wouldn’t beat around the bush. And I knew he hated being in my debt. Truthfully, until tonight, I couldn’t have cared less if he ever paid it. But now… there was something, rather someone, I wanted. And I knew he was the ticket to getting

her. The debt he owed me would be paid and she was the only one that could settle it.

“Why so eager to pay up?” I asked him casually.

He grunted and the head of the Irish actually rolled his eyes. Áine must be rubbing off on him. I’ve seen her roll her eyes quite a few times tonight when we first ran into each other.

“I don’t want that debt hanging over me.”

It made sense. I wouldn’t either.

“You came to me, Callahan,” I reminded him. “You pledged anything, as long as I did that one job for you.”

He should have been careful in offering up anything I wanted for a rescue. But then I suspected he wasn’t in the right frame of mind. If I had to guess, it was shortly before he came to me that he found out about his daughter.

“And I stand by my word,” he grumbled.

“I’m curious though,” I retorted dryly. “What made you so sure I wouldn’t betray you to Benito?”

I watched emotions flicker over his aged face. He was the same age as Benito. While my father’s way of life took a toll on him, it hadn’t on Callahan. Jack’s clear blue eyes were sharp and his silver hair evidence of wisdom years of ruling the Irish brought him. Of course, Jack didn’t torture little girls and women either.

“The fact that you don’t think of Benito as your father,” he replied, surprising me. “And I had a contingency plan if you betrayed me. I gambled, but not reaching out would have been a bigger gamble. I wasn’t willing to let my pride cost Áine her life.”

Callahan was a much better man than Benito would ever be.

My driver pulled in front of me. He had been waiting on the corner, knowing I never stayed around long here. This might have been my longest visit to my nightclub ever.

“How is Áine?” I asked him instead. I could feel him eying me suspiciously. I opened the car door. “Want a ride

home?”

The suspicion lingered on his face, and I was almost tempted to roll my own eyes. “If I wanted you dead, Jack, you’d already be dead. You are no good to me dead so don’t fret.”

“Fine,” he grumbled and typed a quick message on his phone. Probably notifying someone he was hitching a ride with me. In case he turned up dead and all that.

He slid into the seat and I followed suit. The driver put the car into drive and took off. I knew Jack didn’t forget my first question, but I wouldn’t ask him again. He might have a bad temper, but he wasn’t stupid.

“Áine is good,” he finally answered. “Moving from London was a bit hard on the girl, but she came through.” I nodded. Her mother married Callahan a year after the prime minister was murdered. By my own father. But only a handful of people knew that, including Luca, Nico, and I. The prime minister was murdered the same year we saved Áine from the human traffickers. Afterwards, Áine and her mother moved to the States and lived with Callahan in New York under his protection. You’d think across the ocean would have been safer. Except that aligning with a worthy opponent, like the head of the Irish mafia, was safer in this instance.

She had been so close, but strangely our paths never crossed until now.

“About the debt I owe you,” he started, swiftly changing subjects. Or maybe not so swiftly since my mind was already made up. I slid open my phone, reading a message from Luciano. “I am open to offering up territory, payment, or a marriage alliance.”

Bingo!

I kept my eyes on the phone and my expression unmoving. “To Áine Evans?” I asked casually, as if surprised.

There was no need for Jack's next words. I knew the answer before he opened his mouth. His whole body tensed, and I could see it from the peripheral, his face turned blood red from rage.

"Áine isn't part of any deals," he gritted out. I flicked my eyes up and cocked my eyebrow. "And she never will be. She has no connection to the mafia, with the exception of being my step-daughter."

Interesting. He was willing to deny their blood relation to spare her.

Callahan kept her away from all his business associates and events. She finished high school here in the States, under the protection of Callahan and his men. Then she went off to college to study architecture. In our world, he kept her life as normal as possible.

"Maybe that's exactly what our world needs," I told him casually. "More humanity that comes from people outside the underworld. They have a better gauge for right and wrong, you know." I thought Callahan would get a brain seizure; I could practically feel his anger boiling and steaming up the car. The bastard in me couldn't resist taunting him a bit. "Besides, let's not forget you approached me and offered me any debt. Your exact words were you'd give me *anything* I wanted."

He knew his mistake. You never offer *anything* to sinners like us.

"No sane man would ever let any innocent into our world," he gritted out. "She has suffered enough. I'd rather have war than let her get mixed into this shit."

And there it was. A declaration of war.

When I remained quiet, he continued, "Áine Evans will never be on the table for anyone in our world or our position." *We'll see.* "But you can have Margaret." *Hard pass.*

I returned my gaze to my phone and shrugged my shoulders. "I'll think about it."

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Chapter Four

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CASSIO

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Two Years Later

Two fucking years.

It took two years to get everything lined up. Make my father weaker. Set in motion a plan that would ensure Áine became my wife. Not wild Margaret Callahan. It had been two years since I'd touched that fiery red haired woman, and it was enough to drive a saint crazy.

And I was by no means a saint, but I *was* a patient man.

"I'll depend on you to coordinate the wedding," I announced through the speaker. I sat in my office, in Nonno's home in Sicily. My home. It was the only place Luca and I considered home. The villa was wired using the best technology, thanks to Nico. "Keep the knowledge of the arrangement between the two of us to a minimum. Only people that you trust. I don't need a war with my father to start just yet."

Except, the war with my father had been brewing for as long as I could remember. I was slowly crumbling his empire, and he couldn't do anything about it. He attacked Luciano's wife, but he lost. He attacked our shipments and lost those battles too. But knowing that I aligned with the Irish would have my dear old dad go on a damn murder rampage. And nobody needed the New York City streets running red.

“You can count on my wife,” Jack Callahan announced. “She knows how to do it.”

“Excellent,” I told him. “Nico will be our go-between for now, to ensure this remains under the radar.”

Nico Morrelli had been one of my closest friends for a very long time. While I’ve known Luciano since we were kids, Luca and I often sought refuge in Luciano’s father’s home when my father wanted to beat us black and blue, Nico I met in college. Nico saved my life when my father sent an assassin to end it.

It was ‘*don’t ask how I get my information,* and *I’ll always give you fair warning’* with Nico. I took him up on it because I knew right away he’d be a worthy man to keep on my side.

It was only thanks to Nico that Luca’s and my identity had been kept out of any digital footprint. Nico had a tech company that controlled information and images on every possible web database. People might know our names, but they didn’t know our faces. It allowed for easier movement among different social circles.

Luciano and Nico were one of my first formal alliances. Both men were brilliant and trustworthy. Nico’s father wasn’t worth a crap, but Nico knew that already. It was the reason he basically overthrew the old man and took charge of all his father’s territory.

The call ended and I leaned back into the chair, my eyes roaming the scenic tree lines of lemon and orange groves. The mountains stretched in the distance and the scent of the sea and citrus drifted through the air. It was the only place I felt at peace. Right here.

It was the complete opposite of the New York City skyline. Regardless, none of it meant a damn thing, not without having someone by my side. Nonno’s words that he’d uttered so many times before finally made sense. *Without a woman to share your happiness and sorrows with, all your sacrifices will be for naught.*

I had found the woman to share it all with, except I had to connive and cheat to get her. Seemed to be the legacy of the King family. No matter how much I fought it, my father's blood was still part of me.

What was Áine Evans doing at this very moment? Getting lost in her architectural drawings? Partying with Margaret? Or my least favorite - hanging out with her boyfriend? I have had her watched and stalked over the past two years. I knew everything there was about her - her favorite store to shop at, her favorite color, her favorite food. Nico dug up information on her from her college years. Imagine our surprise when we learned she actually interned at Nico's company for a few months. Right in D.C.! But even if our paths crossed, she was too young back then. She also traveled a lot, for business and personal, with Margaret, which was perfect since it kept her away from her boyfriend. Those two didn't spend much time together. Again perfect. But the idea of anyone else kissing her fucking burned me on the inside. I had to play my cards right or risk losing it all.

Boyfriend, I scoffed to myself. I haven't had a woman since our nightclub rendezvous. I finally understood Luciano's obsession over the last three years. Though, I'd like to think I was a lot more rational in my obsession than my best friend.

I often wondered whether it would have just been easier to kidnap and marry Áine, instead of all this. But I couldn't risk having the Irish as my enemy. Not now, when we were so close to ending my father and Marco.

"There you are," Luca announced his presence, as he strode towards me from the terrace. "Nonno is looking for you."

My little brother looked more at peace here too. Less tension, no need to look over our shoulders. My grandfather ran the mafia in Sicily. Right alongside Luciano's ancestors. Unlike my father, Nonno never got

greedy and he was fine staying and ruling right here. Benito wanted the world. The greedy bastard wanted free movement across any territory so he could traffic women and anything else he wanted.

It wouldn't be for much longer though. Things were wrapping up.

I stood up and rounded the desk. Nonno insisted when I set up this office that my chair faced the French windows. So I could see the light, he said. Of course, he was right. It gave me perspective, reminded me of how fickle life could be. The sun could turn into rain in the blink of an eye; just as life could turn to death.

"Is he in the garden?" I asked him.

"Of course. Where else?"

When I got to Nonno's garden, I found him seated on the stone bench. It was his favorite spot. He'd watch over his garden and sometimes gaze out into the azure sea, thinking of the good old days. Before he sent his only daughter to New York. His only conflict with those thoughts were Luca and I. If he had never sent her, we wouldn't be here.

Though sometimes I had to wonder if that wouldn't have been better. For my mother. For Nonno.

"Nonno," I greeted him in a low voice. I didn't want to startle him.

His head turned my way and a smile spread across his face. You could see his soul through his dark eyes and just like I remembered from my mother, it was a gentle one. He might have run the mafia, but he kept his humanity.

"Ah, Cassio. Sit with me," he offered. I took the seat next to him, my body making him appear even more frail.

Comfortable silence filled the space between us, mixing with the sounds of the sea in the distance and the breeze in the trees.

"I want to see you married, Nipote." *Grandson*. His voice was firm. "Before my time on this earth is over, I want to see you and Luca happily married."

I laughed. Not because it was far-fetched, but because both of us wanted it too. Luca might not have accepted it yet. I had the moment I saw Áine two years ago. But it was a delicate matter.

Nonno narrowed his eyes on me. “Marriage and love are not laughable matters, Cassio.”

I looked away, unsure if I could promise him something I couldn’t control. I was fully aware the manipulation I had in the works could backfire.

“I’m working on it, Nonno,” I admitted. “There is a woman, but it is not that simple.”

He met my eyes, searching out the truth in them. I held his gaze. In some aspects, his eyes were as dark as mine, but I knew without a doubt I had Benito’s eye color.

“Who is she?” he asked.

“A girl I rescued a long time ago,” I told him. “Benito had her tortured.” Nonno slammed his foot down, the strength surprising me. I hoped we’d get at least a few more years from him. He was approaching his late eighties, but his health was good. Mediterranean sun and diet, he’d say. “We crossed paths. She’s the one,” I added. I didn’t want to waste my breath on Benito or Marco.

Suddenly, he grinned, a wrinkled smile evidence of his long life and reaching out, patted my hand. “It took me one second to realize your Nonna was mine too.”

His eyes traveled over to the sea again and I knew he was thinking of her. “Bene,” he murmured as if everything was settled to his wishes. “We will have a wedding.”

And that concluded that topic.

“Cassio, are you sure you know what you are doing?” Nico’s question was valid, considering he knew my plans. It had been a week since my conversation with Nonno, and

Nico just got married. It didn't prevent him from questioning me on his wedding day though. That man always kept his reason. Except around Bianca. "If Callahan gets a whiff of your deceit, he'll go into full attack mode."

He was right; of course he was right. I hated lying but the options were limited. Therefore, I intended to use Margaret Callahan as a decoy bride, set her up to fail, and then force Callahan to give me Áine. If it didn't work, I'd steal her. Easy, right?

Back to my friend's question though. Did I know what I was doing?

Well, not exactly. It wasn't as if I schemed to set a trap for my future bride very often. Or ever!

My eyes traveled over the view of the vast Chesapeake Bay. The sun reflected over the flat surface of the water, smooth as a glass. It glittered across, the shadows of lights dancing on the surface.

The house was a security nightmare, but the views were amazing. No wonder Nico's wife was in love with her house. Though it didn't take a genius to know she and her twin girls wouldn't be staying here. Nico and I were currently in a small room that was set up as an office, but from the looks of it, it was barely used. Nico had hacked into Jack's system and sent me all the wedding plans that would be happening in the near future.

Luciano kicked off a trend three years ago when he married. It just took a bit for the rest of us to follow. After all, we were in our forties, hardly as young and green as we used to be.

My attention returned to my friend. It was Nico's wedding day. He trapped himself a wife successfully. That made two married men in our group now, three with Vasili. Maybe I should ask Nico to help me out? I wouldn't be surprised if he had been planning this for a while. Though he held his cards close, making me wonder what he was

hiding. Not that Nico's love life was any of my business, just as mine was none of his.

"Yeah, I know what I'm doing," I finally answered him. "Just like you know what you are doing with Bianca Carter."

"Morrelli," he corrected me in an agitated voice. "Bianca Morrelli."

I chuckled. Nico had it bad for the dark-haired woman. At first impression, I thought Nico got himself a meek little woman, but it took Bianca all of fifteen minutes to dissuade me of that impression. Yeah, she was soft, but also fierce. I was certain she'd give Nico a run for his money. She wouldn't take any shit from him. And whether Nico wanted to admit it or not, he was crazy about his new wife.

"My bad, Bianca Morrelli," I retorted, chuckling. He gave me a dark expression. It was kind of comical seeing the cold, calculating Wolf being rattled by a mere woman. A short and soft homemaker at that. Nothing against homemakers, but you wouldn't think Nico would be brought to his knees by one. Made me like Bianca even more.

"Stop being an ass, and tell me you have everything set up for Las Vegas," Nico grumbled. "Margaret Callahan has already started arranging wild parties, including a visit to a running Chippendales review, so getting that one sidetracked shouldn't be too difficult."

Margaret has been known for her wild ways and wild parties. I didn't care for either, but her and Áine were close so I'd accept her, as long as she didn't drag my future wife into her clusterfucks. And my soon-to-be bride would certainly not attend Chippendales. That party would be canceled at the last minute, due to *unforeseen* events.

"Everything has been set up," I told him. Things were finally in motion. I had been patient for a long time, but now that I was close to the finish line, I was eager to cross it. I just couldn't afford to make a mistake.

The door to the office swung open and Lorenzo, Nico's right hand man, burst in.

"Benito fucking King is here."

Nico and I shared a glance. There was no surprise in his expression, he must have anticipated the visit. Unbuttoning his jacket so he could have easy access to his gun, we headed for the door.

Hopefully, this wouldn't turn into a bloody wedding.

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Chapter Five

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CASSIO

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Five months later

Clusterfuck.

And to think I'd worried about Margaret Callahan's clusterfuck. I had more than plenty of my own to clean up. The entire underworld was in havoc after Benito's death. It had been five months since he had kidnapped Bianca. March was right around the corner and with it a hope for new beginnings. Luciano had a new baby on the way. I wouldn't be surprised if Nico and my sister announced a surprise soon. Though as far as those two were concerned, the stork was bringing that little bundle of joy.

But unless we handle Marco and bury him six feet under, the threat would always be there. That little weasel of my half-brother was no better than our father. He was drunk on power, and without Benito to control him, he was all over the place. Marco had suddenly gone wild. He thought of himself better than everyone else and ready to conquer the world. He was too dumb to see that the power was slipping through his hands and other mafia families already started sideline wars, unconcerned with innocent casualties.

Bianca, my sister, killed our father. Half-sister who I never knew existed. I was so damn proud of her, and to think I had thought her meek when I first met her. Not by a

long shot. She was strong in her own way, protecting the ones she held dear.

Of course, that wasn't the official story. My sister killed our father, but it was Luca that claimed it. For her protection. Nico was willing to take the blame. After all, he had reasons of his own to want him dead, but we all agreed. We didn't want it touching Bianca, and for her and the twin's protection, we'd keep it away from her and her family. She shouldn't be pulled into all this shit. Luca insisted he should claim the responsibility. His reasons made sense, but it didn't sit well with me. My brother was the man I grew up protecting, not offering him as a sacrificial lamb.

Yet, I begrudgingly agreed. For Bianca. She was a mess when all the events of the day finally sunk in. It was gut wrenching to watch our sister break apart at her mother's funeral. She just got her mother back, only to lose her all over again.

Luca and I had fallen for our sister's charms, the need to protect her from this cruel world we grew up in driving us forward. It was what drove all of us - Luciano, Nico, Luca, Vasili, and myself… we wanted a chance to have a family. In order to protect them though, we had to eliminate Marco and destroy the King's legacy of trafficking.

That legacy destroyed so many families, including my own mother.

Father's laugh traveled through the house - loud, obnoxious, and mocking. I was too young to understand everything, but I already knew he was cruel. Evil. Mamma liked to watch Disney movies, and I'd sit through it with her. I was too old for them, but she loved them, so I'd keep her happy.

But in those movies, I always saw my father in the villains. The evil queen in Snow White*. The evil stepmother in* Cinderella*. The evil witch in* The Little Mermaid*. Of*

course, Benito was evil on a whole new level, but it would take me a few more years to learn that.

An eight year old's heart certainly didn't know any better.

The sounds of glassware crashing and a gunshot echoed through the large mansion. It sounded like it came from the inside. Benito hated anyone firing off inside. He preferred all the mess outside. He always bellowed, "Inside is for fucking, and outside for shooting."

But the gunshot came from the direction of Mamma's room. So I ran fast and hard, taking two steps at a time up the marble foyer to get to the second floor and then down the hallway, towards Mamma's room.

Each step closer to her room had my heart beating harder and faster. It felt like my chest would explode. Her bedroom door was closed. She always told me never to go into her room when the door was closed. Yet, an invisible force was pushing me. Ignoring the hard rule, the only hard rule she imposed on me, I swung the door open to find her room empty.

Yet, I sensed that it wasn't.

Holding my breath, my eyes frantically searched each corner, then my eyes locked on the door to the bathroom. It was slightly ajar. The light was on and a faint noise.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

It sounded like droplets of water. I made my way to it and pushed the door open. So much blood was the first thought that hit me. My mother's lifeless body lay slumped over in the bathtub. Her dark eyes were open, a void and empty look in them. At that time, I thought the entire bathtub was full of blood but it was blood that stained the water red.

Standing still, scared that maybe I would make it worse if I moved, I watched. Watched and waited, hoping she'd blink her eyes and we'd just clean her up. I would help her.

My eyes roamed over her, worried that clothes she wore and were drenched by now would make her uncomfortable.

I could still remember that empty feeling. Helpless feeling. Her dark hair soaked wet. Red blood from her temple mixing with her hair, barely visible but still there. You couldn't miss it.

Heartbeats passed.

One.

Two.

Three.

Nothing.

She still hadn't moved. I knew it in the pit of my stomach, she wouldn't move.

But I still hoped.

A piece of paper caught my attention. Slowly, as if worried I'd disturb Mamma, I reached for it on the sink counter. There were stains on the paper. Red.

Glancing my mamma's way, I read the words.

"Be worthy men to love, sons." Her voice was a faint whisper in my head, as if she was reading me those words herself. "Your father wasn't."

Yes, my father was good at destroying good things and good people. Marco inherited that gene. So we'd protect our own at all costs. Bianca and the twins would be protected but so would my brother. Forty years of caring for him were hard to erase. Especially after fucking Ivan Petrov thought he could assassinate my brother. But the Nikolaev men would get him, I was assured of it. If they failed, I'd go after him. Nobody fucked with my family and got away with it.

Though I had no doubt Alexei Nikolaev would get him. His drive to finish Ivan Petrov was unparalleled.

Needless to say, the expected blow back on Luca, when the news of Benito's death started circulating, had been an added nuance and problem to deal with. I just didn't expect it to be so significant. The underworld found Luca's

supposed killing of our father an offensive crime and wanted to see him punished.

Over. My. Dead. Body.

From all the fucked up things men in our world did, they found killing a cruel, sick, and twisted psychopath who caused thousands of innocents' death to be an offensive crime. It made you question their sanity for sure. We needed to clean the damn house. Yes, we were criminals, but even we should have some standards. I learned that from Nonno. People aligned with Benito, and now Marco King had absolutely no standards, except for self-absorption at anyone's expense but his own.

I should have known things weren't going to go down easily. Nothing ever went down easily. But as Nonno claimed, *Nothing worth having is easy*.

So it would seem Nonno was right. Yet again.

Standing in the middle of my warehouse on the outskirts of New York city, I eyed packages stacked up to the ceiling.

A few days earlier, I intercepted the shipment of women Marco, my cruel and sick-in-the-head half-brother, was trying to smuggle into my territory and sent them back home. In the process, I also stole his smuggled shipment of guns, AK-47s, and I was sure he was shitting his pants right about now. The men that expected the delivery of those were not tolerant of delays. It would be another strike against him.

I couldn't deny it felt smugly satisfying to see it all here, knowing that Marco was losing his mind. I'd rather burn it all down than see him get his hands on it. But be that as it may, Luciano's men were coming to fetch it and would move it to another location so Marco nor his minions would ever be able to locate it.

Truthfully, watching Marco squirm under pressure, waiting for Luca and I to come for him was priceless. I would take pleasure in watching him crumble, piece by fucking piece. He didn't deserve a quick death. Marco's

cruelty surpassed my father's. And the little prick was paranoid, so he surrounded himself with military grade protection and even had a doppelganger.

He was more than happy to dish out cruelty, but the little prick couldn't take a punch. He was a sneaky weaselly little prick. There were rumors Marco was trying to take over Vegas with assistance of Ivan Petrov, the sick Siberian prick. I wished both of those cocksuckers would freeze their balls off in Siberia. It would be a great service to us all.

Either way, I'd never allow my brother's nor Ivan's expansion. As long as Luca, Alexei, or myself were alive, neither Ivan nor Marco would continue gaining power. Besides, Alexei was taking care of Ivan. Or he would - very soon. We just had to end both of them. Once and for all.

I glanced at my watch. It was a quarter to three. Luciano's men should be here soon. It gave me just enough time to ring Alexei Nikolaev.

I scrolled through my phone contacts and dialed him up.

"Cassio." Alexei's cold tone crept through the line. He never bothered even with the briefest greeting.

"Marco's working with Ivan," I told him. First that fucker tried to assassinate my brother and now he aligned himself with Marco. Two strikes against him. The third one he wouldn't survive.

I had a suspicion Ivan was aligning himself with Marco so he could take over. Petrov probably suspected Marco wouldn't survive long in this world. He might even kill Marco himself. It didn't matter; they were both dead men to me. Petrov might act like he had certain scruples, but he had none. There was nobody that could attest to that more than Alexei.

Two heartbeats passed. I could feel the temperature drop even over the phone. He hated Ivan Petrov, not that I could blame him. It was his cross to bear.

“Let’s see who dies first, shall we?” he retorted in a frigid voice without a hint of emotion before the line went dead.

I didn’t expect a reaction from him. I couldn’t recall a single time I saw even a flicker of emotion on his face. If I had to guess, it was his coping mechanism. In this fucked up world, we all had our own way of dealing with our crosses. I was nobody to judge.

Not long after, Luciano’s men came and loaded the trucks with the equipment. The warehouse was empty, just as it was this morning.

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Chapter Six

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CASSIO

With my business settled in New York, I arrived in Las Vegas.

Callahan's women were here too. Áine Evans, my little butterfly. I hadn't touched her nor spoken to her since that night at my club. I could have gone against Callahan and taken her, but it wasn't the right move or the right time. It would have put her in harm's way back then. It wasn't worth risking her life like that. But now, it was time to take what was mine. What had been mine from the moment she took her first breath.

She was mine to protect. Mine to love. She was simply all mine.

So, I had finished up some business, and now would decompress and trap my future wife into my little web. Three for one. The latter would be the sweetest conquest.

I wanted to get married quickly. I had the perfect excuse with Nonno's latest request, his wish to see me and Luca married. He said it many times, over and over again, that he would refuse to die until he saw his grandsons married. It never had so much merit as it did now. It put extra pressure on me since Luca made it clear he had no intention of getting married. Ever. I would have had the

same response before my rendezvous with Áine two years ago.

Collecting Callahan's debt and getting married was my sole purpose now, and with a certain red haired woman in mind, it would be no hardship at all. The wedding would happen, and I'd take my wife to visit my grandfather in Sicily. His time on this earth was coming to an end. I didn't like to think about it; he was the only real family Luca and I had growing up. He was our mother, father, grandparent, and everything in between. He taught Luca and I how to be strong, fight our father with more than just guns. It was thanks to him that we became lethal and worthy opponents to the unscrupulous men that worked with the King empire.

"Ready, brother?" I asked Luca.

We resembled each other, at least we were always told that, but our personalities were nothing alike. He was laid back, quick with his smiles and charm. Me, not so much. Our father's brutality, viciousness, and cunning left a mark on my soul. A stain. I was too ruthless, too emotionless, too harsh, like a dark threatening cloud. Maybe I was more like him than I cared to admit. Or maybe I saw too much of my father's cruelty before Nonno took us away. Either way, I was too much.

Too much of something that makes you a perfect killer, my grandfather would say smiling.

He always hoped to live long enough to see Benito King fall. When he heard Benito's own daughter killed him, he grinned like a shark. Bianca had become his adopted granddaughter with that act alone. The bastard deserved his death; we all knew it. For what he'd done to our mother and numerous other women.

"Let's rock-n-roll," he replied. My three men stood in all-black suits, guns tucked in under their jackets, wearing their earpieces and ready to go. I didn't need bodyguards to defend myself, but it was always better to have backup

than to lack it at a time of need. Besides, we needed them on standby.

The walk from the penthouse hotel suite to the nightclub was short. The moment I entered the club on the top floor, the entirety of Vegas at our feet, I headed for the private VIP suit. The entire club had glass walls that allowed the never sleeping Las Vegas lights to glitter, like the sins this city was made out of.

A woman waited for us in the VIP suit. She wore a dark red dress, accenting her black hair, her curved body more uncovered than covered. She didn't do anything for me. There was only one woman for me, and soon, she'd be my wife. If our interaction from two years ago was any indication, the two of us would be a perfect fit.

Our hostess for tonight assured us we would have anything we needed - from drinks and food, all the way to drugs and women. Everything was on the menu in the city of sin. Thankfully neither my brother nor I were into any of that shit, only drinks would do for us. We were capable of finding our own women. Besides, I'd already found mine.

Drinks, whiskey, scotch, champagne, and bourbon bottles had been placed on the table, waiting for us.

"Can I pour you a glass?" the woman asked, her voice husky, insinuating. Her eyes were hungrily roaming my body, not even bothering to be discreet. She wanted to ensure I knew I could have her right now and right here, but I had no intention of taking her up on her offer. Or any other woman.

But soon, I'd collect the debt Callahan owed me. Right now, I'd have to use a decoy. Callahan didn't know I knew his secret, and once my plan played out, I was certain he wouldn't be happy.

"Scotch," I answered. Dismissing her out of my mind, I looked around the room. There was nobody around that would catch my attention. Our area was closed off from view of the public, but we could see them all there.

“Bourbon.” My brother only drank bourbon when he was celebrating or found a woman to fuck. I followed his gaze, and once I saw what, or rather who, he was staring at, I grinned. Margaret Callahan and Áine Evans. They just strode in, their steps sure and in sync. Like they owned the club.

Two years without her were too long. Way too long. Her hair gave off flickering fire colors that changed shade each time she moved. I watched her lean over and whisper something in Margaret’s ear and the two shared a smile. I knew from her background that those two spent a lot of time together. Their personalities were very different, yet they seemed very close.

After a few more exchanged words, they joined a crowd of women on the dance floor who were clearly celebrating. Margaret Callahan and Áine Evans quickly became the center of it all. I couldn’t peel my eyes off Áine. She had turned into the most exquisite woman I have ever seen. Her long red hair, colors of burning embers, reflecting under the dim lights of the nightclub caught everyone’s eyes.

Two fucking years and I could still hear her moans, remember how soft her skin felt under my palms. I wanted her more than anything. Nobody and nothing would keep me away from her. I told Nonno I would marry her no matter what. And I meant it.

I’ll cheat, steal, and kill as long as she becomes mine at the end of it all.

Except, the readiness to go to that length reminded me too much of Benito.

Shoving any thoughts of my resemblance to that bastard out of my mind, I focused on the woman my heart desired. Her hair flowed down past the swell of her breast and I couldn’t help but remember how her silky strands felt wrapped around my fingers. The images of gripping those soft ember strands flashed in my mind, how her mouth

parted when she was turned on…. I remembered it all. Every second of that night.

At that exact moment, she smiled at one of her friends and my cock stirred. Fuck, that smile! Every goddamn time, it lit her whole face up. *Will she smile like that for me?* She smiled like that for me that night two years ago.

She twirled around, her back exposed to me, and it took all I had not to walk over to her and drag her into an empty room. Just like I had two years ago.

Sweet Jesus! I couldn't remember when was the last time my cock stirred from just looking at a woman. *I guess it was two years ago*, I thought wryly. It all went back to that night.

Her graceful back was wide open, driving my imagination into overdrive. Two thin straps held the little dress together, lowering to an open back that dipped to the top of her ass. Each time she moved, the dress played a game of peekaboo. I kept on staring, waiting for a more revealing view, but it never came.

"It's Áine," Luca spoke in a low voice. "And Margaret." Like I could ever miss them.

Bringing my glass of scotch to my lips, I downed it. My eyes never moved from their forms, watching them dance wildly to a song I have never even heard of. Something about monsters or some shit like that.

"Would you like another glass?" The hostess' voice came through.

"Yes." I never removed my eyes from two women on the dance floor.

"The song is "Monsters Come Out At Night,"" the hostess tried to explain although I never asked. "It's quite popular now."

I didn't give a fuck. "That's all. Thank you," I dismissed her.

For some reason, that I didn't want to ponder on, the song struck a nerve. We were two of those monsters. And

right now, I was lurking in the shadows, stalking my prey. I had been stalking Áine for a while now. She became my obsession.

And in order to get her, I had been prepared to do a lot of bad, morally questionable shit. Callahan wasn't willing to put Áine on the table, so I'd force him. After all, debts came in all shapes and sizes.

The song changed to a slower one. I watched Margaret and Áine exchange a few words. There was some hassle back and forth, then Áine headed out of the club, Margaret right along with her, leaving the rest of their group to continue the party.

Odd, I thought to myself. They just arrived and were already leaving.

I stood up from my seat, my drink forgotten, and stalked their way. My brother followed, and I quickly barked out the order to my men to remain behind. Two of us would be enough. We didn't need an entourage to crowd the women.

I was on a mission, hunting them. As we exited the club, I saw their little forms down the marble hallway, a few straggling visitors passing them by in either direction. They strode with intent and purpose, almost as if there was something urgent going on.

"Let's take the stairs." Áine's soft voice traveled over to us. "You have the weapons?"

Luca and I shared a glance. Why would those two need weapons?

"Yep!" Margaret nodded. "I'm ready to kick some ass."

I frowned. It wasn't often that I was confused or surprised, though now I was both.

Áine chuckled. "You are always ready to kick ass."

What the hell was going on?

Changing my plan, I looked over to my brother and shifted to the shadows. I wanted to know what the women were up to. Luca and I kept our footsteps quiet, sticking to the shadows and corners of the hallway so we wouldn't be

spotted. We probably appeared like full blown stalkers, but both our interests were piqued. Good fucking thing we always wore combat boots, no matter what suit we wore.

The two disappeared through the exit door, taking the stairs, and I reached for the door handle when my phone dinged. I glanced down to see who it was.

It was Alexei and I silently cursed. He wouldn't message just for the hell of it. He only called or messaged when it was something important. I couldn't ignore his message.

"Have our men follow them," I told Luca.

No other words were needed. We had to know what those two were up to.

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Chapter Seven

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ÁINE

Margaret and I were pushed so hard from behind, I fell forward onto my knees, my hands instinctively reaching out to stop the impact. My knees burned from the fall, but I ignored it. This was part of the plan. As were the revealing club dresses we still wore. These men were fooled to think we were weak, their prey.

When in fact, we preyed on them. They fell into our trap. We were never vulnerable. John and the rest of the guys from The Rose Rescue had eyes on us all along. In fact, they were probably out there right now with transportation.

“Surprised to see such a fancy place in Vegas?” The guy that smelled like cheap cologne sneered, his eyes roaming over both Margaret and I. As if he was deciding which one of us he’d break first. The answer was *neither*.

Fucking idiots! They thought they were so smart, yet they brought us exactly where we needed to be. In the midst of the little King trafficking ring. In an abandoned warehouse outside Las Vegas. The place was filthy, and the musty scent of dirt and piss filled the air.

I glanced over at Margaret. She was on her knees too and we shared a fleeting look. We’ve been doing this together for years now. Benito and Marco King were

clueless that a pair of women were slowly disassembling their corrupted little empire. Nobody knew it but a selected few. Benito was dead and his sons would be next.

The name King would cease to exist, if it was the last thing I did. They'd pay for killing my father and hurting so many innocents.

Okay, so this wasn't my normal job. I worked as an architect at HC Architecture. This was just my side gig. We all needed hobbies. Well, this one was mine. I fucking loved bringing down bad guys.

A snicker came from the men behind us, focusing me on the current situation. My eyes flickered to Margaret who rolled her eyes annoyed. She would have preferred we just bombed the place, but we had to ensure the women they kept in here were taken out of the warehouse before we did that. If they weren't here, I'd be all on board bombing this place to dust.

Pushing myself up, I surveyed the room. There were four men behind us and four in front of us. We could easily take them out. They were so stupid and conceited; they never even thought to search us. I had a gun and knife strapped to my upper thigh, concealed by my dress. Margaret had a gun. She didn't like knives.

My lips curled into a smile. I couldn't help it. Every time she saw a knife, she screeched like she saw a snake; it was comical.

"What's so funny?" one of the men asked. He seemed to be their "leader." I scoffed at that. He was some pathetic loser, a low ranking criminal. "You won't be laughing when Marco King breaks you in," he drawled in a way that made my skin prickle with disgust. "I heard he loves redheads."

A nasty grin spread across his face, but I kept my features schooled. I wouldn't let him see how much I hated the thought of any member of the King family around me. They were disgusting and cruel, true psychopaths. I wouldn't rest until every single one of them was dead.

Starting with Marco King, since dear old daddy was killed by someone else. The rumor was that one of his illegitimate sons killed him - Cassio or Luca King.

It was odd really. Benito and Marco King's information and pictures were easy to obtain. It was all at our fingertips. But information on Cassio and Luca King was elusive. Not a single picture. Not a single record. Not even a date of birth. Nothing. Just their names. It made me wonder why that was. It was clear that both Benito and Marco enjoyed the spotlight. Probably something empowering about it to those sick assholes. The knowledge that the entire world knew those two were criminals, yet they were so elusive.

Not so elusive anymore. Benito King was dead. Marco would soon follow. The illegitimate sons too - if I could only get my hands on their information. Their names alone didn't help me in tracking them down.

In my mind, psychopath equaled the Kings. Those two were synonyms. I couldn't think of one without the other. Though I did come to a conclusion over the years. Psychopaths had many different faces. Race, gender, ethnicity, rich or poor - none of it mattered. Some people would probably call me a psychopath too. I didn't really give a shit. I killed men that committed unimaginable crimes. That caused suffering to innocent little girls and women. And I fucking loved it. There was a sense of justice to it.

It was time to kill these men.

I scoffed at the stinky, dirty little man that kept leering at me.

"I don't give a shit what Marco King likes." I locked my eyes on the lowlife who thought he could add two more women to his collection for Marco King. He preyed on the innocent, helpless women. "But I'll be sure to let him know you tried your best to deliver us," I sneered. "Right before I kill him."

And with that, both Margaret and I sprang into action. Reaching underneath our dresses, the men were more concerned to see a glimpse of our thighs than what we kept underneath it all. Taking a deep breath, the scene that unfolded was a blur. Margaret had her gun and fired shots at the men behind us, hailing bullets on those assholes. I aimed in front of me. Tightening my grip on the handgun, I flicked off the safety and leaped forward. I fired rounds of bullets in quick succession and watched as bodies flew backwards.

A grim satisfaction swam through my veins. These men were the rot of this earth. They deserved to die for all the harm they caused to women and families they have broken. The sounds of Margaret's and my breathing was the only thing I heard in the hollow of the empty warehouse, bodies of men sprawled over the dirty floor.

Through the years, Margaret and I learned to be in tune. To fight, but still be aware of each other. To keep each other alive.

Another man came up to me, but before he could put his hands on me, I shoved my knee between his legs with all my strength. He hunched over, I grabbed his head with both my hands, then snapped his neck with the loud crack of his bones. No matter how many times I've heard it, it still sent chills and creeps crawling down my spine. But also a sense of thrill. Knowing that he'd never hurt another woman felt incredibly good.

A whimper sounded and I followed the sound. The leader of the group tried to crawl away, desperate to save himself. Dropping the dead body onto the ground, I strode barefoot to him with quick steps. Then kneeling down next to him, I studied him. He was gurgling on his blood, his eyes frantic and full of disbelief on me.

"Women?" One word, no need to waste my breath. He knew what I wanted to know.

“Locked,” he whimpered. “Back of the warehouse. Help me.”

I’d much rather gut him and watch him suffer slowly than help him.

“Give me the key,” I demanded. He was insane if he thought I’d help him. He never even attempted to help the women that were locked up. His face was a bloody mess, blood trickling from the side of his mouth.

“Left pocket,” he gurgled.

I rifled through his left pocket and found it. Yanking the keys out, I stood up. Raising my head, I spotted Margaret walking towards me. She held her own against the men in the back, and they all laid dead on the dirty warehouse floor. I was so damn proud of her.

She flicked a glance at the man dying at my feet, his eyes frantically darting between the two of us. The dimmed lights throughout the warehouse made the dead bodies seem ominous, but it would be worse with innocent women’s deaths.

Pointing the muzzle at him, Margaret smiled mockingly. “Any last words?”

She liked to taunt. *Must be the Irish in her*, I mused.

His eyes came to me, panic in them. “You said you were going to help me,” he muttered.

I shrugged. “No, I didn’t. I asked for the keys.”

The same moment he realized his mistake, Margaret’s gun went off, killing him on the spot. We both watched the light extinguish in his eyes. It was better than he deserved. The women they kidnapped would have endured months and years of pain, abuse and agony until they were discarded like garbage.

Sometimes I wished I had that kind of time to torture these men and make them suffer. Give them a taste of their own medicine and see how strong they were.

We headed towards the back of the warehouse and the closer we got, the worse the stench became. I clenched the

key in the palm of my hand, the grits of it digging into my skin. It was always the same; each time we saved them something pricked in the back of my mind, a faded memory. But I couldn't catch it. I could never catch it.

It was frustrating as fuck.

I opened the door and the smell of urine assaulted my nostrils. A group of about thirty women were crammed in a small room without any windows, no bathrooms. Their whimpers grew and crying started.

"We are here to help," I told them softly. "We are taking you somewhere safe."

They were caged in worse conditions than animals and anger boiled within me.

Fuzzy memories danced in the back of my mind. A cave echoing, painful screams pierced through my mind, drowning out all the noises surrounding us. As if looking through a lens, I saw John and the rest of the men of our The Rose Rescue rush past me, Margaret comforting the panicked women. Images flashed through my mind, fuzzy and distant.

He wore a menacing, gruesome smile displaying rotten black teeth. My stomach churned, the woman screamed underneath him as he pounded into her hard.

"Can't touch you," he snickered. "But I can do to her what will be done to you."

Her brown gaze connected with mine, her tear stained face broken with pain as her body slid up and down the table as he thrust into her. Her head hit the side lamp with each thrust, but she never winced, like the pain didn't even register.

She was older than me, much older. But it didn't make it right. She was as helpless as I was. Tears streamed down my face yet not a sound left my lips. I should scream; I should fight. Yet all I did was stand there frozen with fear.

A loud grunt sounded through the room, the last shove of her body against the lamp, sending it flying off the desk

and shattering across the dirty floor.

I didn't want to look up. I really, really didn't want to look up. My eyes lifted, on their own will, to see him pull himself out of her. His hand reached between her thighs and brought it up onto her face, smearing his white gooey substance all over it.

The memory vanished as fast as it appeared and my body retched. Another meal gone, another disturbing memory that caused my stomach to churn and empty its contents. My skin was clammy and light perspiration appeared on my forehead as I stared at my thrown up dinner.

Migraines would follow soon, warranting a visit to the therapist. He could cure the migraines and bad dreams or memories, but never this hatred for the Kings.

The King family had to be stopped.

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Chapter Eight

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CASSIO

Bone splintered beneath my fist, and I watched as the man's head snapped back. He gurgled, choking on his own blood. He deserved nothing better, but before he choked to death, I wanted answers.

This fucking pussy was one of Marco's minions. God, if he surrounded himself with men like this, I should just attack him and kill them all. It wouldn't be hard at all.

The skinny bastard had been begging for his life for the past twenty minutes, and we'd barely started. Mercy was an unfamiliar concept in our world. He should understand that, especially working for Marco.

"Location of the warehouse," I told the pathetic asshole. "And it will all be over."

Smashing into his other cheek, his body, tied to the chair, flew onto the ground. "P-please, he'll kill me."

"And what do you think I'll do to you?" I cocked my eyebrow. My fists were bloodied from all the punches I'd dished his way. My mood was crimson today. My men lost the trail of Callahan's girls last night and now this moron was withholding information.

Not for long though, I sneered mentally.

Luca's and my gaze met. He leaned against the wall, frustration clear on his face. Something had been up his

ass all damn day. He stared at me, like I stole his favorite piece of candy. I guess neither one of us was doing great today.

“Last chance,” I told our captive. I was ready to end this day. “Give me the location. Or I’m going for your family.”

His eyeballs almost popped out of his skull. “Y-you wouldn’t. Everyone knows you don’t fuck with innocents.”

I landed another punch, breaking his nose, and grinned. It probably looked more like a shark baring his teeth than a grin. As far as I was concerned, this guy deserved whatever was coming his way. He should have never gotten in bed with Marco.

“If they have information on Marco and the women he is smuggling-,” I said, nonchalantly as I bent his index finger, bones cracking, “…then they are not exactly innocent.”

And that did it. After that, the guy was more than happy to share the location.

The weasel squealed like a pig. “A Siberian gave Marco a warehouse to store the women in,” he screamed. “Boss is waiting for clearance from his contact in New York to move them to the city.”

I scoffed. Marco was anything but a boss, and I had a suspicion I knew who his contact in New York was.

“What was the Siberian getting in return?” I spat out.

“Women for sex and his club, and boys for his fighting ring. Or some shit like that,” he whimpered. That could be only one Siberian Russian guy. Ivan Petrov.

Ivan Petrov, the head of the Siberian Russian Bratva in Las Vegas and Eastern Europe, was of the same caliber as Benito and Marco. But that guy didn’t stop at women, he also kidnapped orphaned boys and had them fight in underground tournaments. There was only one rule in those underground fighting rings - one survivor. Alexei Nikolaev was one of those rare survivors.

I pulled the gun out of my holster and aimed.

“Wait!” the little shithead whimpered. My finger on the trigger was itching to pull it. “I know something!”

Luca and I shared the briefest of glances, then I returned my attention to the bloodied face.

“Well, don’t let me stop you from spilling your guts. I don’t have all day.” Truth was that I wanted to see Áine again. Even if I couldn’t touch her, just seeing her soothed me down to my bone marrow.

“Marco is holding a tribute to his father.” I raised my eyebrow. Did this idiot really think that would be of any interest to me? I wouldn’t attend a tribute to my father if my life depended on it. “He plans on collecting on all new and old debts. All of them! Then he’ll hold the largest auction of belles in history.”

The rage gripped my heart and molten anger rolled through every fiber of me. It consumed my every breath, causing my heartbeat to falter. I’d like to think it was all due to the anger that thrummed through my veins, but it was more. So much fucking more.

That weasel of my brother dared to threaten my sister, my nieces, Grace and Ella, and who knew how many more. He really had a death wish, because once word of this got out, every husband, father, or brother would be after him.

“When?” My voice was strangely calm and unwavering while every living cell within me shook with fury.

“Don’t know. Please,” he begged. “I just overheard it by accident. I can try and find out more.”

To hell he will. I wouldn’t risk Marco finding out that we knew. The risks were too high.

I pulled the trigger and his body slumped forward, blood streaming down the side of his face.

I met Luca’s gaze. His expression was as grim as my insides felt. This hit too close to home.

“We have to warn them,” he rasped.

I hated to dish unwarranted information their way in case this information was all wrong. But there was no

alternative. If we said nothing and something happened, we were just as guilty.

My hands bloodied, I headed to the sink and washed them before pulling my phone free of my pocket and sending a group text.

Rumor of Marco holding final belles auction. He'll attempt to collect all of them, past and present, for the final auction. Keep security tight and eyes open.

Pressing the send button, I shoved my phone back into my pocket. I was tired. So fucking tired of all this shit. Years of doing this and some days it felt like we made no difference.

"Now what?" Luca asked. He wanted to go hunt our brother, except that wasn't an option. Not right now, not today.

"Now we go save the women being held in Ivan's warehouse."

They needed our help today. Tomorrow we'd help the others.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, LUCA AND I WERE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF Las Vegas, the seedy side that was never shown in the movies or postcards. The neighborhood was rundown and filthy, many families living in the underground tunnels. It was families on this side of the town that were most vulnerable.

"Man, this is some shit," Luca muttered. "Millions of dollars spent on the Las Vegas Strip and then this. Run down shacks."

He was right. Las Vegas for all its flashy lights, hid a lot of rot underneath it all. Sins and poverty were plenty in this city. Families destroyed by gambling and drugs. As if that

wasn’t enough, trafficked women and forced prostitution had started expanding greatly.

We passed the neighborhood, knowing full well we couldn’t save them all, and came to a clearing.

Fuck. Me. There was a recent explosion here. A rather big one too.

“Did he double cross us?” Luca gritted.

“No,” I told him, scanning the area. Yellow tape was everywhere and on the opposite side of the clearing was a van. The bomb squad. “There seems to have been an explosion.”

He followed my gaze. “Fuck. I hope those women weren't here.”

I hoped so too.

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Chapter Nine

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ÁINE

"Margaret," I groaned. "Don't you think this is a bit too much?"

"No, I don't," she replied. Of course, I knew she'd say that. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror. I felt uncomfortable wearing this. She picked up a sparkly little dress in the boutique of this luxurious hotel, claiming I had nothing appropriate to wear.

I beg to differ, I thought wryly. My whole suitcase contained plenty of appropriate clothing to wear. This dress she picked out for me was inappropriate. It was so short; it barely covered my ass. My whole back was pretty much exposed… naked. The dress I wore last night to the nightclub was excessively revealing, but compared to this one, it was a nun's outfit. The side of my breasts played peekaboo each time I moved, revealing enough but thankfully not all of it. If it was just us girls having a party at home, I wouldn't have minded. But going out dressed in something Margaret had picked out, it was bound to attract unwanted attention.

The haunting brown eyes of an unknown woman being raped frequented me. The images flashed in the back of my mind, unfocused and scrambled, causing a constant, lingering headache. I knew the signs; I was used to them by

now. They had become a permanent part of all my broken pieces. And I was so damn sick of being broken.

There was only once in the past eleven years when I had felt normal. When I felt whole.

Two years ago. In the dark of a nightclub.

I could still remember how good his touch felt. His palms on my thighs, his tanned skin marred with that rose tattoo against my pale skin. Panic never came. Only lust - and feeling protected. The most ridiculous notion considering I didn't even know his name.

The light pang of regret hit me. I should have kept my head and at least asked for his name. Or maybe it was just a casual hookup for him. For me, it was so much more.

A revelation. A hope. That maybe, just maybe I could be normal with someone. Share intimacies with a man rather than panic attacks at a simple, familiar touch.

I studied my reflection. My blue eyes stared back at me, revealing nothing of the turmoil brewing inside my brain and soul. A perfectly normal and sane young woman stared back at me. On the outside, I was put together. I was whole. Yet on the inside, I was all shattered glass with no hope of ever being repaired. The fragments of me were irrevocably damaged.

After all, it was the reason I kept visiting a therapist. To keep the images that tore at my mind at bay. I couldn't understand where they were coming from. Maybe it was my overactive imagination at seeing the state of the women we saved. Though I didn't think so. I remembered every single woman's face that we'd saved since I took over The Rose Rescue. I had never seen the women that haunted my dreams and memories.

Shoving it all into a deep, dark corner, I observed my physical appearance. I stood at barely five foot six. My body was strong, resilient. It was the only thing working for me. I studied my red hair, pulled up in a high ponytail, and the vibrant color of it was striking against the silvery sparkly

dress. I applied light makeup to my eyes and my lips, and a tiny bit of blush. I knew blush wasn't necessary since I'd be blushing all damn evening. Bad side effect of being so fair-skinned.

I felt exposed. But at least my appearance hid all the fractured pieces. Everyone would focus on the flashy exterior and ignore the interior. *That is the goa*l, I thought wryly to myself.

"Fuck, you look smoking hot," Margaret spoke up and instantly I blushed. *See, no blush needed.* "Let's see if Chad can resist you tonight."

I groaned inwardly. Not Chad again. I hadn't told her what happened this morning. It was over between him and me… or it would be very soon. Not that we had much of a relationship. I could barely stand his nearness.

Chad Stewart was the state's attorney for New York. We met at one of the functions that my step-father had been invited to about a year ago. My mother had a migraine so I stepped in. I wasn't even sure how we started dating. He was handsome, charming enough, but it wasn't like I was attracted to him. In fact, I felt towards him the same as any other man I had ever met, except one. Physically, I couldn't stand his touch.

Initially, I rejected his offer for coffee. Several times. But he was very determined. After multiple attempts, I finally agreed and surprisingly had a good time. I worked a lot, traveled a lot, so in theory, we didn't spend much time together. He didn't complain and neither did I. It kind of worked.

Though now thinking back, it really didn't work. I should have known a platonic relationship wasn't really dating. It was naive and stupid of me.

Either way, Chad and I weren't for each other. We were stuck at the same spot in our relationship, if it could be called that. He didn't stir any emotions or cravings within me. In fact, I froze every time he tried to kiss me. I sensed

a while back he was getting tired of waiting. After this morning, I got my confirmation.

It didn't hurt. There were no emotional strings attached between the two of us. What hurt the most was that I got another confirmation at how damaged I was. I tried so hard to overcome the way my body reacted. To no avail.

There was only one man that ever made me crave physical closeness.

My mysterious stranger. I didn't even know his name. Nobody had ever made me lose control of my body like him. No name. No contact. Nothing after Margaret came banging on the door, interrupting my perfect stranger's session with my body.

Jack, my stepfather, and Margaret's brothers came searching for us in the club. While the bouncer had no issues stopping my cousins from entering the club, he wasn't inclined to refuse Jack Callahan. After I had to leave abruptly, I regretted not giving the stranger my number or asking for his. But everything happened so unexpectedly, it never even crossed my mind.

I wanted to go to the club the next day, but things were heated for a few days afterwards. My stepfather was rather pissed at Margaret and me the next morning, then shortly afterwards I moved to my own apartment. Life somehow got in the way, but I never forgot him.

A month later, I drove by that club several times, but much to my dismay, I never saw him again. I even approached one of the front bouncers describing him and asking if he knew who he was. All I got was a blank stare. I took that as a negative response. I promised Jack I'd never go into that club again, and since the bouncer had no clue who I was talking about, it seemed silly to break my word to my stepfather.

But that orgasm was…. *Ugh, better stop thinking about that.*

It was really frustrating that my body rejected anyone else. I had no idea where it was coming from, but each time a man tried to initiate even a touch, I froze. My body would shut down and my mind would scream in protest. At twenty-five, I had to be the oldest virgin in all of New York.

Much to my dismay.

It wasn't exactly the position I competed for. My adventures with my trusted battery operated friend weren't so exciting anymore. Especially after experiencing how great the real deal could be. My stranger gave me a glimpse and then left me high and dry.

"Do you think Chad will like it?" Maggie asked. I shrugged. It didn't really matter if he liked it or not.

Chad! My body definitely didn't want him, but I guess I kept this *relationship* going with hopes that it would somehow work out. Both Mom and Jack kept encouraging it, since Chad was following similar footsteps in politics like my father.

I should have known better. Though I wished Chad had enough decency to at least acknowledge and tell me it wasn't working anymore before he went and slept with one of Margaret's girlfriends. That was shitty, but men tended to do shitty things, I guess. Maybe my instinct warned me all along not to trust Chad, to keep him at bay.

After all, my instinct was what helped me survive all the tense situations I had found myself in ever since my father had left me his little side rescue business, The Rose Rescue. Though I gave it its current name. I scoffed in my mind. A prime minister running a side business. Somehow you never thought you'd hear those two together. Yet, it was true. Before his political career, Dad had seen some shit. He thought he'd make a difference becoming the prime minister. He did, but not as much as he wanted to. So he reached out to some of his buddies and started a rescue mission with the information he was able to obtain due to his position. But diplomacy played into rescuing innocents

too often. Border crossing. Foreign territory. Foreign rules. Days dicking around to this or that ambassador. When legal hands were tied or slow, he'd save the women the illegal way. And I got it all, on my eighteenth birthday.

Anyhow, back to Chad. I didn't say anything to Margaret about his cheating ass. She'd go after him and gut him, or at least put a bullet in him since she hated knives. It would be entertaining to watch, but none of us needed any drama right now.

Geez, we'd become bloodthirsty over the last few years. Truth was that seeing how cruel men could be and the way they took advantage of vulnerable women made us determined never to be vulnerable.

But my inability to feel comfortable with a man's touch was one thing I didn't talk to anyone about. Including Margaret and definitely not my mother.

"Is this your interpretation of a bachelorette weekend?" I asked her. Her wedding wasn't for another eight weeks or so, but with our crammed schedules, it turned out to be the only weekend we could celebrate.

"Yes, our wild weekend before I get hitched." She frowned, a crease between her brows showing her displeasure about it. She hated the idea of an arranged marriage. I didn't blame her; I would have hated it too.

She called this our wild weekend. Every time we did one of her wild weekends, we got into trouble. I loved her and she was always there for me, but her energy levels were dangerous at times. It was the reason I pulled her into my little organization, to burn some of that energy and do good at the same time.

Her secretive marriage was mind boggling. She didn't give me a name because she didn't know it. When she told me it was an arranged marriage, my mouth just about dropped. Ever since she found out about it, her wild parties had gotten reckless. I tried to be there with her whenever I

could. I didn’t want anything happening to her. She would do the same for me.

Her phone rang. When she didn’t move, just kept turning around, checking out her ass in the mirror, I asked her with humor in my voice, “Are you going to answer that or is your ass just so interesting?”

She looked up and our eyes met in the mirror. “It's my uncle.”

Ah, so she was avoiding him. I shrugged. It was her business, and when she wanted to talk about it, she would.

The next second, my phone rang. I guessed who it was, but just to confirm my suspicion, I reached for it. It was my stepfather. I couldn’t ignore him like Margaret did, so I slid the answer button.

“Hi, Jack,” I greeted him.

“Áine, where is Margaret?” Jack went straight to business, his tone sharp and hard. He was in his head of the Irish mafia mode.

“Hello to you too,” I retorted dryly. “She is getting ready and can’t come to the phone right now.”

Yes, I covered for her. She covered for me too. That was what friends did for each other. And she was so much more than that, family by my mother’s marriage to Jack.

“I bet she can’t,” he muttered, probably guessing she was avoiding him. “Tell her I do not want to see another hundred thousand dollar gambling debt come through.”

I cringed. I didn’t realize Margaret found time to gamble, never mind lose a hundred grand.

“Sure, I’ll tell her,” I assured him, giving a pointed look to Margaret who was back to checking her ass.

“How are you?” Jack switched subjects, his tone softening. For some reason, he treated me like I was too fragile and needed protection. I was way past that stage. I was capable of killing, just as easily as he was.

“I’m good,” I told him. “Vegas has been fun so far.”

If he knew fun equated to successful missions and killing men, he'd have a cow. But no need to stress the elders.

"Good, but don't make it too much fun," he joked.

"Are you and Mom having your dinner date tonight?" I asked. The two of them made dinner date nights regularly. It was just their time. I questioned them once before and Mom told me it was Jack that insisted on it because they missed so many dates in their life.

"Yes, we are," he replied. "I'd offer to bring you a dessert home, but it'd spoil by the time we see you." I chuckled. "Will you come see us next week?"

Jack disliked the fact that I had my own apartment. He was against me moving out, listing every single reason under the sun. Even potential snow blizzards and being stranded in that apartment building. "It has been a few weeks and we miss you."

People talk about step parents like they were spawns of evil, but for me, it proved to be the opposite. Jack had been like a real father, no worse or better than my own dad. I loved them both, and they were the most important men in my life. I lost my dad, but I didn't forget him. And Jack often listened to me reminiscing about him when we first lost him.

"Yes, I'll come next week," I promised him. "Maybe we can have dinner and watch a movie?"

"I will make a plan and pick a movie," he agreed eagerly. We had weekly dinner and movie plans when we first moved in with him. We kept the tradition until I moved out. Occasionally, we still made plans for it, but it was no longer a weekly activity.

"Perfect," I answered. "I have to go and get ready. Pick a day and let me know. I'll try to make sure I can fit it into my schedule."

"Your mom will be happy," he beamed. "Talk to you later. Keep Margaret in check. Love you."

“Love you too,” I answered, ignoring his comment on keeping Margaret in check. If Margaret decided on something, there was nobody on this planet that would hold her back. “Bye, Jack.”

I hung up and met Margaret’s gaze on me. “Let me guess,” she deadpanned. “He is complaining about me spending money.”

I rolled my eyes. “When did you have time to gamble?” I asked her instead of confirming her comment.

She chuckled. “It only took me thirty minutes,” she crackled. Wow, I had never spent ten grand in thirty minutes, not to mention a hundred grand. She twirled around. “How do I look?”

Thankfully for the change of subject, I jumped on it. “Like hotness on two legs,” I told her.

“Perfect,” she beamed. “Let’s go.” She looked gorgeous and sexy, in her short red dress and black heels. Her dark hair made the color of her dress even more vibrant. Red was definitely Margaret’s color.

Her hair was coal black and her eyes were the same shade as mine. Despite my hair, people often confused us for sisters. We’d laugh and shrug them off. She was the closest thing to a sister I’d ever had. The moment my mother married my stepdad, our family suddenly became extremely large. I had uncles and so many cousins… and best of all Margaret and her brothers. They never made me feel like their step-cousin, and I was grateful for the warm way they welcomed both my mother and myself.

We exited our room and headed down the hallway. Only the two of us got a room on the top floor. The rest of the party had their rooms a few floors down. Some kind of mix up, and they made it up to Margaret and me by giving us the penthouse suite.

We started walking down the hallway, in the direction of the elevators, our heels clicking against the marble floor.

“These shoes are so impractical,” I complained. It was little after seven in the evening. Knowing Margaret, we’d be partying all night and my feet would be killing me. “My feet are still killing me from last night.”

She laughed out loud. We lost our shoes somewhere during our adventure last night, trying to save those women.

“Fuck practical, Áine,” she cursed, giggling loudly. “We’ll party like it’s our last night alive. We deserve it after last night.”

“Shhh.” I bumped my shoulder against her, to remind her to keep her voice down. “Honestly, practical and comfortable is so much more enjoyable than hotter,” I objected with a smile at her enthusiasm to party. It was a Chippendale night.

“You can’t look smoking hot being practical or comfortable,” she continued explaining, completely ignoring me. “I can’t wait to see men shaking their booty in my face. I hear they are super-hot.”

I cringed at the image of a man shaking his booty in my face. I’d break his goddamn legs if he attempted. I will politely reject him and find a corner away from them all.

“I wasn’t going for a smoking hot look,” I told her. “More like surviving all night. We were smoking hot last night. We should alternate, you know.”

A soft noise behind me had me turning when Margaret’s words stopped me, the noise forgotten. “We are taking the elevator.”

Ugh, here we go again. I hated the elevators. I couldn’t even remember the last time I was in one. *Push me out of a plane, let’s go bungee jumping, anything… just don’t put me in an elevator*.

“Why can’t we take the stairs?” I objected, all Chippendale men forgotten.

“We don’t want to walk more than we have to in these heels.” Her reply made sense, but I avoided elevators with

a desperation. I didn’t know what drove my claustrophobia in fucking elevators, but it wasn’t a pleasant experience. “This nightclub is different from last night and we’ll have to walk a bit to get there.”

“We can do it,” I tried to justify. “We could take our shoes off and just walk the stairs barefoot.”

For Pete’s sake, we trained and kicked ass. We could certainly survive the stairs.

“Are you nuts? If you want to burn energy, we’ll dance with those hotties tonight, and we’ll get laid. If we are climbing and descending twenty flights of stairs, I’ll be worn out. So will you.”

There she went with getting laid again.

This time I groaned out loud. “Margaret, come on. Let’s take the stairs.”

She threw me a side glance. “What is it with you and the elevators?”

“Nothing,” I muttered defensively under my breath. How could I explain something I didn’t understand myself? As far as I knew, I didn’t have a problem with claustrophobia. It never happened anywhere else, and this phobia of elevators started specifically in my teens. No clue what started it. Just came out of nowhere.

I guess compromise was in order. She endured dragging our suitcases up the stairs with me, not wanting to leave me to do it alone. We could have had the hotel porter bring them up into our rooms but our weapons were in them. I couldn’t afford to have the suitcases displaced. It wasn’t like we could walk into any store and pick up a gun on a whim.

“Fine, elevator it is,” I retorted in a resigned voice.

Even as I said those words, my heart started racing. Damn it, sometimes I felt broken. Just fucking broken, and I had no idea why. I started my breathing technique the therapist taught me.

Take a deep breath in. Exhale. Take a deep breath in. Exhale. Take a deep breath in. Exhale.

I was so focused on it, I didn't realize we were already by the elevator. Margaret pushed the button as we stood waiting.

Take a deep breath in. Exhale. Take a deep breath in. Exhale.

"Are you doing your thing again?" Margaret's voice startled me.

"Doing what thing?" I never told her about my claustrophobia in the elevators.

"Your breathing thing," she retorted. "You did it yesterday too, right after you puked your guts out." Yeah, yesterday was not good. I should have been helping to evacuate women before we bombed the place down. Instead, I puked my guts out. "Sometimes I wonder what the fuck happened to you."

I laughed, although the laugh sounded strangled to my own ears.

"You and me both," I muttered under my breath.

"Ladies," a man's voice sounded behind me, and I just about jumped out of my skin.

"What the fuck?" I squealed, whipping around to see who was behind us. A gasp left my lips the moment our gazes met and familiarity washed over me.

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Chapter Ten

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ÁINE

Holy shit! Was I delirious? Maybe I was running a fever and didn't realize it.

My mysterious stranger. My orgasm man was here. ***Right here!*** I could lean over and touch him. Goddamn it, he was gorgeous. He looked even better than two years ago. The club that night was so dim, but holy Hades. My panties just melted.

My breath sucked into my lungs on a deep inhale and my breathing exercise went out the window. He was mere feet away from me, but I felt him as if his body was flushed with mine. Fuck, arousal hit me like a tsunami. If I could, I'd push him into a dark corner and jump him, begging him to make me feel all those things I felt two years ago when he had taken me into his office.

The ink on his neck was intriguing and threw off vibes that screamed dangerous.

And lickable.

So damn lickable. I swallowed hard, my heart thundering in my chest.

Then reason sunk in. There was no recognition in his eyes. Nothing at all. It was like staring into mysterious darkness. Yet, I never forgot him. There were so many nights that I touched myself, imagining his hands on me.

Even now, just the thought of it made me combust into flames.

I narrowed my eyes at him, annoyed that the man that I'd fantasized about for the past two years didn't even show an ounce of recollection of what we'd shared between us. The man I went furthest with.

He's not even that great looking, I told myself. Just sexy enough to ignite my entire body into heat. But whatever!

My expression was schooled, but I couldn't keep my eyes from roaming over his body. I'd bet wearing a black, three piece suit was his signature wardrobe. It was sophisticated and expensive, but the tattoos threw it all off. He had ink on his hands and neck, but if I had to guess, he had it elsewhere too. It was one of my regrets from two years ago; that I didn't get to see that mouthwatering body underneath his suit.

I lifted my eyes slowly over his torso back up to his face. His whole presence was dominating, but those eyes. Dark and full of secrets. I wanted to see the specks in his gaze. An invisible force pulled me to him. To feel his heat. To feel his lips on me. Would they feel as good as I remembered?

"Whoa." Margaret's voice came from somewhere. Yes, exactly my thought. Her eyes roaming over the two men appreciatively. Did she not remember him?

Probably not. Margaret hooked up with someone else that night. She came banging on the door but never actually saw the mystery man.

He kept his hair short although there was enough to push your fingers through it. I curled my fingers into a fist, fighting the urge to plunge them through the strands to his scalp. There were light traces of silver in his black hair that weren't there before. Or maybe I just didn't notice them that night.

That same feeling of familiarity I sensed when I first met him snaked down my back. It frustrated me that I couldn't get rid of the sensation that I was missing something.

There was something about him. I searched my memory, like I had so many times before only to come out empty. But I was certain there *was* something. From a long time ago. It was right there, hidden in the thick fog. The throbbing in my temples started, the ache piercing through my skull. I didn't realize my fingers were pressing against my temples until Margaret shook my hand off my head.

"Áine, are you alright?" I broke eye contact with the stranger, turning to Margaret.

"What?" The haze in my brain made it hard to think. And there were things lingering in the fog that I couldn't quite grasp. A hand lurked in that fog, reaching out. Yet, I could never quite grab it.

Great, I'd have to visit my therapists the moment I got back to New York.

"The elevator is here," Margaret muttered. She held the door, her eyes impatient on me. "I told you like three times."

"Sorry." I shook my head, as if it would clear the fog in my brain and lust in my body. "My head is killing me," I offered a half-assed excuse. *My pride is hurting me even more*, I added silently. Talk about a severely impacted self-esteem - he didn't remember me at all.

We both stepped into the elevator and the men followed behind us. My elevator phobia was the furthest thing from my mind right now. Instead, all my senses were zeroed in on the man that entered behind me.

God, those lips… a cocky, arrogant, ever-knowing smile played around those sinfully full lips. I forced my eyes away from them and kept studying him. I didn't know his name, never asked him for it that night. It was just an innocent dance, not so innocent kiss and… oh crap, those same butterflies I felt two years ago were back.

Get your shit together, Áine! Keep your panties on and cool off. The man didn't even recognize me. It must not have been as memorable to him as it was to me. *Asshole!*

Going from turned on to insulted wasn’t helping my mental state.

“Are you guys staying here?” Margaret asked them boldly.

I glared at her, then titled my head to the side to give her a pointed look, shaking my head. She just ignored me. Of course, she would ignore me. When it came to men, she chased them just as passionately as we chased the criminals.

Only one of the men nodded a response, but said nothing. My hookup guy didn’t even acknowledge her, which was unusual. Men usually fell all over themselves for Margaret. I avoided looking into his eyes again, but from the peripheral, I could sense him watching me. Maybe I looked familiar to him, and he was trying to remember me.

Not sure if that lifted my spirits or not, but when the number of men that could make your body burn with craving was as rare as endangered species, you didn’t have the luxury of acting undignified. Or maybe my slutty pussy just wanted an excuse to feel his fingers inside me.

Great, now I was blushing and probably looked like a damn tomato.

Okay, forget him, I groaned silently. Not. That. Good. Looking.

I’d tell myself that until I believed it.

“We are celebrating. Maybe you could join us?” Margaret used her sultry voice and put her most seductive smile on. I scowled, demanding with my eyes for her to stop. If these two joined us, I wouldn't be responsible for my actions. I’d attack and possibly hump my perfect stranger.

It was the name I assigned to him and somehow it stuck.

“I’m so sorry,” I chimed in, forcing a smile onto my face. “But our party is full.”

Margaret’s head snapped to me. ‘No, it’s-”

“Remember, they gave us a limit,” I lied boldly, trying to convey with my pointed look to her that we didn’t need any trouble. “We are full.”

Besides, no man in their right mind would want to go to a Chippendale party. Not unless there were also female strippers there too.

She rolled her eyes. “They’d never know.”

My eyes flicked across the younger man’s face that watched Margaret with fascination. A dark gleam in his eyes, almost possessive. *Interesting*. I glanced at Margaret, but her eyes kept darting between both men, completely oblivious to it.

Returning my attention to the men, I noted a striking resemblance between the two. They had to be brothers, I went to open my mouth, but unexpectedly, the words got stuck in my throat. I frowned. He looked familiar too. My eyes went back and forth between two men.

I had met these men, not two years ago but a long time ago. I’d stake my life on it. My eyebrows scrunched, yet no memories came.

Why can’t I remember?

I had a good memory, sharp mind. At least that was what everyone said. With these two men, I felt like I was missing something. Something very important.

“Do I know you?” I asked the younger guy. I had no idea where the words came from. It sounded cheesy, like a bad pickup line. I didn’t care. This was a puzzle that felt important to solve.

Both of them remained quiet, but I saw the briefest of glances they shared. My temple started to throb again, the pulsing, beating sensation a sure sign of impending headache.

“It’s right there, I know it,” I muttered under my breath. My fingers went to my temples, pressing against them. The pain was killing me. This was different from my previous episodes. “I can almost-”

“Áine, what the fuck is going on?” Margaret’s voice held a note of alarm.

I blinked my eyes; each throb through a sharp piercing pain through my skull. It was so intense I thought my brain would explode. I focused my eyes on my cousin, taking measured breaths to help calm down the throbbing headache. I saw the panic on Margaret’s face and regret hit me. This was her bachelorette weekend. It wasn’t her fault I was a bit mental.

I took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and then forced a smile. “I’m sorry. It was nothing. All good,” I told her in a forced light voice. I probably just remembered two years ago and was putting too much value into it all. Besides, yesterday’s events had an impact and shook me to my core.

The whole elevator jerked and came to a stop, causing my heart to skid to a halt and my stomach to drop.

“What- what was that?” My eyes darted around, a memory blinked in my head and vanished the same second. God, I felt like I was losing my mind. Why was all this shit happening this weekend? My whole body tensed while my heart pounded in my chest. My phobia of elevators came back tenfold.

Breathe, I told myself.

Another loud thump of the elevator, then the lights went out and the elevator jerked again. Margaret screeched, the sound almost deafening.

“W-what… “ I couldn’t finish the sentence. There were distorted images playing in my mind, yet I couldn’t place them. *The building shaking. The elevator stopping. Men bursting through the ceiling of the lift.*

My eyes raised to the ceiling, but there was nothing there. It was like watching glimpses of events through a thick fog and trying hard to make sense. I couldn’t connect any of them in my mind.

“Power probably went out.” My head snapped to both men. They were both calm, unperturbed by what was

happening. Not me! I'd lose consciousness any second, my breathing becoming rapid. But somehow not enough oxygen entered my lungs.

Let me be stuck anywhere, just not in the elevator. Anywhere… desert, war zone, just not the damn elevator. My breathing was labored and getting worse with each second.

Then self-preservation kicked in. Without a second thought, I shoved both of them out of the way. They were strong guys, much taller and bigger than me, but I guess adrenaline kicked in. My frantic fingers started pushing on all the buttons.

"Hello? Oh God," I chanted, my lips trembling. "Hello?"

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. *Damn, it's not helping.*

I pressed my forehead against the panel of the elevator, desperate to calm my racing heart while my ears buzzed.

"Stairs. Should have taken the stairs," I muttered breathlessly to myself. If we had, we wouldn't be in this predicament.

"Calm down," Margaret tried to soothe me. "It will probably be a minute or two, five tops."

With shaking hands, I started pushing all the buttons again. I glanced up towards the ceiling, almost expecting someone to barge in.

"Five? I can't hold my breath for five minutes." My breathing got erratic. "Oh my God. I can't breathe."

It felt suffocating. I put my hand on my chest, heart pounding under my palm. I tried to use all my training to ease out the panic, the fear gripping at my chest right now. It wasn't helping. The buzzing in my ears became louder and louder. My panic kept increasing with each breath as if fed by the oxygen, my eyes darting between three of them. "Can you breathe?"

"Áine, calm down." My eyes snapped to the man. There was a note of command in his voice, piercing through my

panicked brain.

The elevator jerked with a loud bang again and the train of my thoughts evaporated. I broke eye contact with him, frantically searching out Margaret. It was hard to see her and sweat beaded on my forehead. Jesus Christ, I'd have a heart attack like this. The past mind blowing orgasm and craving for his expert hands were completely forgotten.

We were still not moving.

The emergency lights came on in the lift. "Oh, this is kind of romantic," Margaret announced.

I swallowed hard, again and again. The chokehold of this panic made it hard to swallow. I didn't find it romantic at all. If anything, deadly was what came to mind. Threats lurked in elevators. It was stupid to think that but the irrational fear kicked in each time I even thought about an elevator.

"Should have taken the stairs," I repeated, while black spots swamp in my vision. *In. Out. In. Out*. I slid down the wall to the floor, pulled my knees up and buried my head between my knees. My lungs contracted and refused to release.

The fact that I was probably giving them a full view of my exposed legs, thighs, and underwear was irrelevant. My hands wrapped around my knees, pulling them closer to my chest.

My body rocked back and forth, trying to soothe myself.

"It will be fine." I felt big hands take hold of my cold fingers. My head snapped up to those dark eyes. Suddenly, nothing mattered but his gaze. The comfort in them felt like a lifejacket while drowning. He crouched down, too, taking the empty spot next to me.

His lips curved into a smile and the tightness in my chest loosened a bit.

"I'm Hunter," he said. "Didn't think you'd see me again, huh?"

He remembers me, my heart rejoiced but it was short-lived.

The elevator jerked again. My eyes widened and my breathing hitched. I stared at the door of the elevator, praying someone would come for us. But the door remained closed.

“H-Hunter, that’s a pretty name.” I called him my perfect stranger for the last two years. My hottie. It will be an adjustment to think of him as Hunter. *Breathe in. Breathe out*. “I don’t know if it suits you though,” I mumbled, my voice breathless like I ran a marathon. And not in a good way either.

I tasted panic on my tongue. “I can’t breathe. You think the elevator will snap? Maybe we are too heavy?”

I could kill men, fight them, slice and dice them, but stick me in an elevator and all my training dissipated. I became a scared little girl.

“Calm down.” His voice was commanding, but my panic refused to recede.

I was hyperventilating. “Oh my God.” I squeezed his hand, my fingernails digging into his skin. “I should have taken the stairs.”

“Butterfly, breathe,” Hunter demanded, his voice smooth, like rain on the quiet, spring evening. Like on one of those days when you could smell the fresh rain and taste it on your tongue. It was soothing.

Butterfly. Only one person called me that. That nickname, *Butterfly*. It only came in dreams. Yet, now this man called me by that nickname. I haven’t dreamt it in such a long time. A man and his voice lingered in the fog. How would Hunter know that nickname that I only dreamt about?

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

“I- I really hate elevators,” I muttered, my words shaky and my chest tied up into a constricting knot. “It’s okay, though. Right? We are all scared of something. I’m scared

of snakes too," I babbled like a mad person. "Maybe I hate elevators more than snakes." A hiccup escaped me while I stared at his hand marked with the rose tattoo. The hand reaching out to me in my dreams had a tattoo too.

Rose petals. It was the reason I selected The Rose Rescue for the name of our company. The hand marked with the rose petals kept reaching out to me in my dreams, pulling me out of my nightmares.

"I can't remember. I don't know why I can't remember," I mumbled, my gaze on the floor of the elevator. "I saw you somewhere." All my comments and thoughts were incoherent. "Not in the club. Somewhere else."

"You know him?" Margaret's voice didn't pull my gaze away from Hunter. I finally knew his name.

"It's okay," Hunter soothed me. I raised my head to stare at those brown eyes. His voice was soothing but his lips… there it was again, that sinful smile. Absent-mindedly, I noted he was rubbing my back and I still liked his touch. "Keep talking."

I took a deep breath in and exhaled. Oxygen was working its way into my lungs, the knot slowly loosening, but fear kept the words flowing through my lips, without any reservation I usually held. Every ounce of bravery was gone, probably fled through the tiniest crack of this fucking elevator.

It felt good not to be repulsed by a man's touch. He made me feel normal, though he might be the only man on this planet that could touch me without causing my body's retaliation.

"Everyone keeps talking about it, being great and all." I raised my head again and met his dark gaze. "But for me, it makes me sick to even think about it. I freeze every time; I literally feel sick to my stomach. I pretend it's okay, that it's normal, but it's not."

The tiny sane piece of my brain ordered me to stop my rambling because I wasn't making any sense.

“What are you talking about, Áine?” Margaret questioned me again, confusion in her voice.

My throat was closed in, hurting to breathe and talk. Part of my brain understood how stupid I was being, but the rest of it was just reacting.

“It’s okay,” his voice comforted. “Keep breathing.”

He sat on the floor, his back against the wall, right next to me. He was way too big to be sitting on the floor, in his custom fitted, expensive suit but having him next to me made me feel safe. I could feel his warmth seeping into my bloodstream, calming me.

“Did we meet a long time ago?” I asked, the question slipping through my lips without a thought.

“You are the prime minister’s daughter,” he replied. It wasn’t an answer, but maybe he knew Dad and I met him in passing.

“He’s dead,” I muttered. “Killed.”

“I know.”

“You worked for him?”

“Not exactly.” None of this made any sense.

“Your suit will get dirty,” I remarked for no good reason. “It looks expensive.” My eyes lowered to my outfit. “This dress should be five bucks considering how little material it has.”

His full lips tugged upward and another string in my chest loosened, allowing me to breathe.

My eyes dropped to his lips that curved into that confident, sinful smile I remembered from two years ago. I knew how good those felt on me, so did he. There was no fooling him. I wanted them on me again. It didn’t matter that he was a mere stranger. For some reason, he felt familiar and safe. Besides, it would be a good distraction, unless I suffocated kissing him. Though it wasn’t a bad way to go.

His face loomed in front of mine, so close I could smell his woodsy cologne.

He was sanity and safety wrapped in one.

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Chapter Eleven

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CASSIO

Áine Evans was even more breathtaking today than she was two years ago. Her shimmering blue eyes could shatter a man with just a glance. Her extraordinary hair color made her stand out from any other woman I had ever known. But even more, it was the fighter in her that I loved. I saw it in that young girl I rescued. I still saw it in the grown up woman.

Two years ago after she walked out of my club, Callahan almost lost his sanity when my bouncer kept the Irish out of the club. Áine's safety was his top priority and he always worried she'd run into either my father or half-brother in my club. Of course, I'd never allow either one of them into my clubs nor around her. Or any woman for that matter.

Once Jack Callahan cooled off after our initial conversation, he became slightly suspicious. He demanded to see surveillance of what Áine and Margaret did in my club. I refused him. He wasn't happy about it, but I wasn't ready to reveal my cards. Truthfully, when I strode onto the dance floor, the surveillance cameras were the furthest thing from my mind. That was what you got when you made moves with your smaller brain that zeroed in on a woman.

And without a doubt, Áine was mine. The only reason I didn't insist Callahan deliver Áine two years ago was for

her protection and to avoid the war. I had to ensure Benito wouldn’t become a threat to her. Not that Callahan would ever let me have her. He was clear that Áine would never be for the taking - by any man in the underworld.

Her parents wanted to keep her outside this world, despite the fact her mother married the head of the Irish mafia. Not that I could blame them. They wanted the best for their daughter.

Well, so did I.

Since the day we saved her, I’d check on her every once in a while. I usually used Nico and his resources. Not to stalk her but just to ensure she was safe. Until that night she ran into me at the club, I never thought our paths would cross again.

The moment our lips connected I knew she was the one. If I had to burn down this world, kill, and cheat… I'd do it. Gladly.

She was mine. Just like Nonno said - it took him a second to realize my grandmother was his.

My life over the past eleven years consisted of building my empire and taking down my father’s. I went from being a hired killer to owning a multitude of thriving businesses. I did it all for one purpose. To be the top dog in the food chain. But there was also an underlying reason why not succeeding wasn’t an option. This woman gave me that purpose and two years ago she became the main reason.

I knew Margaret would be here this weekend with her girlfriends. This hotel was mine, and I made sure to arrange for her and Áine’s room to be on the penthouse level. My intentions hadn’t unfolded yet, but nonetheless, I wanted them as close to me as possible. Margaret Callahan was my insurance. I learned later that Margaret invited Áine’s boyfriend to join them. I couldn’t stand the weaselly motherfucker who worked with Marco. I had to ensure Áine was as far away from him as possible. Destroying him would be an added bonus.

“Your suit will get dirty,” she mumbled, her face pale from fear. I purposely gave her my middle name that barely anyone used. I didn’t want to chance either her or Margaret recognizing me or connecting me to the Kings. “It looks expensive.” Her bleary eyes full of panic lowered to her own dress. “This dress should be five bucks considering how little material it has.”

She looked amazing in it. A total knockout. Once she sat on the floor, panic closing in around her, her dress hiked up to her thighs, revealing a lot and not enough. Luca kept his gaze averted, offering his respect. But the jackass that I was, I kept catching glimpses of her smooth, pale skin.

She would be mine soon anyhow. She had been mine from the moment her hand reached out to me in that wretched cell where we rescued her from.

Fuck, just thinking about it sent rage through my veins. Her black and blue body from the beatings she endured, her school uniform spattered with blood. I was surprised she couldn’t remember us. Yes, it was eleven years ago, but something like that you’d never forget.

“I hate when people touch me,” she admitted. I raised my eyebrow. She let me touch her two years ago. Even now, I was rubbing her back. She was so distressed, she didn’t even realize what she was saying.

Áine closed her eyes, and I got the sense she was focusing on her breathing.

The elevator jerked again and I cursed silently. Áine’s eyes snapped to me, as if she was seeking comfort.

“It’s okay,” I assured her.

“Breathe in,” she muttered low to herself. “Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.”

Margaret lowered herself and ended up sitting on the floor too. “It would have been more comfortable if we went with your wardrobe choice, huh?”

She was trying to make her cousin comfortable. A wobbly smile came to Áine’s lips. “Yes, I think so.”

Her voice was soft and melodious, different from the little girl's I remembered. Even different from two years ago.

Last time we didn't spend much time talking, I thought wryly to myself. Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her short dress, but at least she wasn't freaking out anymore.

"Do you- do you think we'll run out of oxygen?" She seemed brave, tough even. This fear was irrational, and I wondered what drove it. There had to be something behind it.

"No, we are fine," I told her firmly. "Lifts are not airtight."

Her blue eyes, color of the clearest Caribbean seas, locked with mine as if she sought truth in them. Then she nodded, almost as if she trusted me.

"Maybe we should go back to our room after we get out," Margaret offered. "We can take the stairs."

Áine's face was very expressive, at least to me. She wanted to say yes, but shook her head instead. "No, that's okay. It's your night."

I stood up and noted Áine's eyes following me. I offered her a smile and hoped it was a passable one. I rarely smiled, the muscles on my face for it long unused. Though with Bianca, my newfound sister, and my nieces in my life, it was slowly becoming something normal.

It must have worked because she smiled back. Whether she knew it or not, she was strong. I knew it eleven years ago, and it was more evident today. Maybe she made herself forget what she endured, but she was here… strong, beautiful, and prevailing. Just like her namesake.

I looked up her name once since it was so unusual. In Irish mythology, Áine was a goddess who took revenge on a king that deceived her. And the few drawn portraits of the goddess all portrayed her as a red-haired beauty. Ironic really! Since our family's last name was King, and I was

about to deceive this beautiful red-haired woman, the name fit her perfectly.

The elevator shook and her eyes widened. But then the lift started descending, slowly and smoothly.

I offered her my hand. Her eyes watched it warily, reminding me of our first meeting and something in my chest squeezed.

Ba bum. Ba bum. Ba bum.

It took three heartbeats before she took it hesitantly. I watched her pale skin against my tan complexion and somehow we fit. Her hand was cold against my warmth, petite against my large palm. Truthfully, Áine Evans was my opposite in every way, but in all the right ways.

Mine. The words resonated in my chest and nothing would extinguish it but my death.

I helped her up and she quickly pulled her dress down with her free hand.

She took several breaths in and out before she spoke up, offering an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry for freaking out,” she muttered embarrassment all over her face.

“Don’t mention it,” I told her, offering her another smile.

“Bet your ass, I won’t,” she retorted with a small smile. “It’s bad enough that four of us know it.”

Her hand was still in mine. I kept waiting for her to slide her palm out of my grip, but she hadn’t pulled away. Those mesmerizing eyes watched me, as if she was searching for answers.

The elevator door beeped open and a group of people were in front of it. It was Margaret’s bachelorette party ready for their Chippendale performance, which unbeknownst to them, was canceled. A loud cheer exploded as soon as we were spotted.

“Finally,” one of the girls exclaimed. “Are we going to the Chippendale show? I can’t wait to see some ass shaking.”

Margaret nodded enthusiastically.

“Are you guys okay?” Another girlfriend inquired. “We heard the elevator got stuck.”

“We are great,” Margaret announced. “Who’s ready to get lit?”

Another loud explosion of cheers. Margaret was always eager for a wild party and well known for behaving even wilder. Sometimes even borderline reckless.

“Áine, who’s that?” A man’s voice sounded almost too high-pitched. I recognized Chad Stewart. I hated the fucker. He and Áine had dated for the past year with the support of her mother and reluctant support of Callahan. Nobody would be good enough for Callahan's little girl, but his instincts were spot on.

Chad eyed me and Luca, then returned his gaze to her. I wondered if he was her type. Unlike me, he was slim although fit. More of a clean cut politician face than I’d beat your ass into the ground face. Yeah, the latter was more me. There wasn’t anything clean cut about me. Except maybe my wardrobe on the night I hadn’t killed anyone.

“Oh, this is Hunter.” Áine kept her voice light. Watching her like this, you’d never guess she had a panic attack ten minutes ago.

“Why are you holding hands with him?” He tried to sound calm, but I sensed a prissy tone under his fake, civil smile. “I thought you didn't hold hands.”

I kept my expression tight, fighting the urge to break his perfect, little nose and smear his blood all over it. We’d see who’s the pretty politician then.

His eyes shot glares at both of us. Protectiveness swam through my veins, and I had to hold back the urge not to wrap my hand around his throat. Jesus, if only his glare at her made me want to kill him, there would be a lot of dead people.

Chad Stewart was known in my father’s circles very well. The New York state’s attorney had no scruples and

was a dirty politician. These days he worked with Marco a lot, getting rich from kickbacks, turning a blind eye to Marco's smuggling of women.

This weasel just earned himself more attention by me. I'd have to ensure he didn't do something stupid. Especially towards this woman. I wanted to keep Áine away from this creepy rat. He gave me all the wrong vibes. I didn't trust him before he got involved with Áine, but since he started dating her, I knew he was up to no good.

Áine's gaze lowered to where our hands were still connected and her brows furrowed. She must have been so distracted, she didn't realize we still held hands. *Does she really feel that comfortable with my touch*, I wondered.

She quickly pulled her hand out of mine. "He helped me stand up. We were sitting on the floor while waiting."

She stepped away from me and towards Chad. Resentment at her taking a step away from me washed over me like bitterness. I didn't like it. She belonged by my side, not his.

Throwing me a glance over her shoulder, her big striking eyes met mine and she offered a soft smile.

"Thank you," she murmured softly, tilting her head at me and Luca, then turned her attention to Chad.

As they walked ahead, I noted he wasn't touching her. They walked close to each other but not like lovers. Each time his sleeve brushed accidentally against her, she put a bit more space between them.

Interesting.

Luca and I exited the elevator, keeping a small distance. We went in the same general direction as the group but none of them mattered to me except for Áine.

"Why doesn't she remember us?" Luca asked in Italian, under his breath, so nobody else could hear our conversation.

"I don't know," I responded in the same language.

“Are you sure your plan will work?” There was a hint of displeasure in his tone. “It seems cruel to set her up like that.”

Maybe my little brother was right, but the alternative was unacceptable. Giving up Áine would never be an option.

I glanced at Margaret at the other end of the lobby, already drowning shots. “It will work,” I told him firmly. I caught Luca’s lingering gaze on her, a glint of something akin to dry amusement in them. It would seem my own brother had some kind of fascination with Margaret.

Chad and Áine were just a few feet away from us, walking towards the party.

“What the fuck?” I heard Chad hiss in a low voice. “You were holding his hand!”

“I told you,” Áine’s voice was calm, unwavering. So unlike what happened in the elevator. “He helped me stand up.”

Together those two made a good looking couple. He was closer to her in age. He just turned thirty-two, his ruffled blonde hair against her fiery red hair. He wasn’t overly big compared to her small frame. Her background being the prime minister's daughter gave her a perfect political upbringing. It would certainly help his career.

Over. My. Dead. Body. Actually better yet; over his dead body.

“We were supposed to be working on this relationship, not you touching other men.” He sounded like an insecure, jealous prick. The need to smash his face grew by the second and my hands fisted, ready to punch the fucker right here in the lobby of my hotel.

“Don’t,” Luca murmured in Italian. My brother knew me too well.

I saw more than heard her take a deep breath and then exhale. “Please don’t start this now. This is Margaret’s party.”

“Fuck her,” he spat. “I don’t even like her. She is bad for the press.”

Áine didn’t even miss a beat. “But I like her, and I don’t give a crap about the press. If you are worried, leave.”

Atta girl. Okay, so I knew eavesdropping was rude, but I didn’t give a shit. I’ve done worse shit and this was for a good cause.

“I thought we would work this out.” He must have not expected such a quick dismissal.

There was a heartbeat of silence and then Áine spoke in a soft voice.

“Chad, I didn’t invite you here. Margaret did.” She let the unspoken meaning of it linger in the air. Then she continued, “I went to the gym this morning.” I could see Chad’s profile as he turned to look at her. He seemed annoyed. “I stopped by your floor to ask if you wanted to join me.” I could only see his profile, but it definitely paled a few shades. He would have to work on his poker face. There was guilt written all over it. “I saw Bridget coming out of your room.”

I disliked this dirty politician beforehand. Now I just detested him. *If he even thinks to touch her, he dies. After I spend days torturing him and bleeding him dry.*

“Áine, let me explain-”

She cut him right off. “There is nothing to explain, Chad. Let’s just both move on and at least we can remain friends.”

“I don’t want to be friends.”

I saw her shoulder slump, but she quickly got herself together

“I guess then we won’t be friends,” she retorted softly. It rubbed me the wrong way that she would even bother to be friends with a weasel like that.

Chad grabbed her arm and pulled her to him, her body flushed to his. Her free hand pushed against his chest. His

hand snaked to her ass and she froze, terror and disgust clear on her face.

Fury shot through me like burning oil. Without a second thought, I stepped forward and pushed him away from her. He tumbled backwards, almost falling onto his ass. That would have been a sight, seeing the state's attorney on his ass at my feet in the middle of the hotel lobby. I wasn't a saint, but he didn't deserve to even wipe dirt off my shoes.

"The lady doesn't want your advances," I gritted, furious he thought he had a right to touch her. "Give her space."

Áine lost her balance. I quickly wrapped my arm around her, steadying her, and once I was sure she was balanced, I reluctantly let go. I really wanted to keep her in my arms, protect her.

I glared at him, and he was smart enough to have seen something in my eyes because he instantly retreated.

"You good?" I questioned her.

Her gaze connected with mine and my heart thundered. Those deep blues took my breath away every fucking time. She was the only person on this planet that managed to do that to me with a single glance.

"Yes, thank you."

She turned her gaze to Chad, causing a little streak of jealousy through me. *Why the hell am I jealous?*

I knew facts about her. I had known what she studied, where she lived and worked, places she visited with her friends. She wasn't overly outgoing, her personality reserved. She seemed composed and tightly reined in, with the exception of her fear of elevators. Her personality wasn't exactly the one I usually enjoyed in women. The women I took to bed were loose and wild. Nonetheless, nobody and nothing ever affected me like her. Our encounter two years ago set something in motion and ignited the need only she could sate. I wanted to know every inch of her body and soul.

“Goodbye, Chad.” Her farewell to her boyfriend was firm and final, making it clear she would not be seeing him again.

“Áine-” he started to say, but she’d already turned around and started walking away without a backward glance.

“You will stay away from her,” I growled at Chad, anger simmering my words.

His eyes flashed in anger. “Who in the hell do you think you are?”

I took a threatening step forward and he leaned backwards. “I’m a man that will tear off every one of your limbs, one by fucking one. And I won’t rest until you are six feet underground.”

“W-what?” he stuttered, glancing around. Probably looking for his bodyguard, but he was long gone. We paid him off to get lost after obtaining information on why Chad was here. It turned out, Margaret’s invitation was just a convenient cover up. “This is none of your business.”

Chad’s primary reason for the visit was to come and hand select the kidnapped women with Marco, my half-brother. Except, the whole fucking warehouse vanished and the women with it.

“It is now.” He wasn’t scared enough. Yet. “Get within a mile of her ever again, I will ensure your career is destroyed. Then I’ll hunt you down and thrive on listening to your screams as I torture you for days.” Then to ensure he understood what I meant, I added, “I know you enjoy torturing women and rest assured, you’ll get it back tenfold. I can’t wait to show the world what a worthless little weasel you are.”

It wasn’t the right time to reveal all my cards. Not yet. But damn if I’d let him anywhere near my woman.

I watched him open his mouth, then close it and open again but nothing came out of his mouth. He looked like a gulping fish out of water.

“O-okay.” His voice trembled and finally he understood I meant business. He scurried away in the opposite direction of Margaret’s bachelorette party.

“Have one of our guys keep an eye on him until he leaves town,” I told my brother in Italian.

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Chapter Twelve

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CASSIO

It was almost midnight, and from my office on the upper floor, I watched the greed on people's faces as they gambled their life savings away. The plan was unfolding, but now that we were close to the goal, I was getting too restless. Too eager.

I couldn't wait to walk down the aisle and lock the final piece of the puzzle in its place. With the Irish on our side, the last bit of power Marco held onto would disintegrate. Yes, he had some kind of alliance with Petrov but the latter was never on my alliance list. It didn't matter, they'd both meet their untimely death soon.

My father had been causing disarray among all the crime families - Italians, Bratva, Irish, cartel - for years. The uneasy, short lived truce with the Irish went up in smoke the second Callahan learned that Benito King kidnapped and tortured Áine, the daughter he didn't know he had. All the years of bloodshed, just for my father's sick tendencies and hunger for power.

And while I despised him for it, the point that it brought Áine into my world wasn't missed on me. Either way, the man was dead. Good riddance. I detested any similarities to that man. Even one as innocent as my hair color. Deep down, I always reluctantly admitted that Luca and I looked

more like our father than our mother. Just as Bianca knew it. Though I had to admit, my little sister handled her parentage better than I have.

Our brother, Marco, was no luckier. He looked like a skinny, freaky version of our father. He had always been better suited to be Benito's right hand man, though he was younger than Luca and I. It wasn't his skillset that made him better for it; it was his flavor of cruelty.

Both Benito and Marco had the same kind of thirst for blood and cruelty. Thankfully, neither Luca nor I inherited that. I was the oldest, then Luca came about, but we were illegitimate so he considered us a commodity, his personal killers for hire. Except, he never paid up.

While Benito never spared Luca nor I of his torturous, cruel lessons, he never bothered dishing them onto Marco. Fucking prick was pampered. Maybe Benito saw himself in the kid and thought that was good enough. When my mother was alive, she tried to shelter me from our father. Once she had Luca, something just died in her. Benito had broken her irrevocably. A few years later, she had left us in favor of ending her life. It left me to care for Luca and shelter him as she had done with me.

If Benito's wife wouldn't have gotten pregnant shortly after my own mother, he would have dumped his wife and married my mother. I wasn't sure if it was a strike of good luck or bad luck. It certainly wasn't good luck for my mother. It ended up costing her years of misery and ultimately her life, which made me hate Benito even more. Hate in a little boy's body was a dangerous thing - it simmered until it erupted if not handled.

Benito strung her along, knowing that my mother's ties to the powerful mafia family in Italy could prove useful one day. Fool! Nonno would have never supported him. He wasn't family, never would have been. Even if he put a ring on Mamma's finger.

My poor mother. Her beauty was her weakness. It got her noticed everywhere she went. It didn't take long once she arrived in New York for Benito to spot her and sweet talk her into his bed. She was too young, too naive. She gave him years before giving up.

Now, *we* had to end it. Once and for all. Bianca took care of Benito. It was our turn to take care of Marco. End these auctions for good. Clear the entire East Coast of trafficking. And then finally live our life. Enjoy our hard earned family and friendships.

The alliances we'd made would ensure that peace and rules remained in place.

I played my cards and waited. Now I'd make Callahan pay up his debt. Patience was a virtue, I was told, and I intended to have it pay out hefty dividends.

My office door swung open and my brother strode in towards my desk. The large see through glass behind me gave me the entire view of the casino and the dance floor. I owned both the hotel and casino where Margaret held her parties. She and her bachelorette party were moved here after their sudden cancellation of the evening performance. The group was wild and loud, switching between dancing and gambling. Chad had left the hotel and town. It didn't take him long. *Coward!*

I watched Áine on the dance floor with Margaret. She moved gracefully, just like last night. Margaret was hammered. And despite the latter's stumbling and helping her remain on her feet, Áine moved smoothly and with finesse. A picture of grace. Her little dress drew in everyone's eyes. Her red hair was a stark contrast against the sparkly material. She danced with a soft, amused smile listening to Margaret's rambling from the looks of it. The panicked woman from the elevator was completely gone. How many walls did she hide behind?

Margaret was intoxicated. And that was putting it mildly. She gambled away a hefty sum, and I knew Callahan would

probably give me a call at any moment. Just like he had the previous night or night before. If he couldn’t control his niece, what made him think I could. But in his mind, she was my intended bride, so I had to feign interest and endure his rant. She needed a firm hand, except it wouldn’t be mine.

The only one in the group that wasn’t drunk and didn’t gamble was Áine. She kept herself together, avoiding men and their attention at all cost as she glided around the dance floor. I watched as yet another man tried to cut in between her and Margaret to dance with her, but she turned her back to him and pulled Margaret off the dance floor. She behaved like a true queen.

My queen.

“You sure you want to do this?” Luca asked. My brother never questioned me. Ever! Yet here we were - twice in two days.

“Yes.” I was positively, absolutely fucking sure. We would bring peace to New York and beat down Benito King’s legacy and our pathetic brother once and for all. Best part was Áine.

Both our gazes darted to the window, watching Margaret throw her head back and laugh.

“We have a man lined up to seduce her?” I questioned Luca.

Luca’s jaw tightened and his hands clenched into fists by his side. “Yes.”

He didn’t want to admit it, but he had a thing for Margaret Callahan. It was unlike Luca not to go after a woman. It made me wonder why he kept his distance from her. It couldn’t be because she was a Callahan. It wouldn’t have mattered if she was the president's daughter. If he wanted her, he would have gone after her.

“Luca, stai bene?” I questioned my brother. *Are you good?*

His jaw ticked, but he kept his eyes locked on the ladies.

“Sì.” *Yes.* Clipped answer.

He wasn’t good. Something was bothering him, but I couldn’t resolve it if he said nothing.

“What is bothering you?” I tried again. When you’d taken care of someone for so long, it was hard to stop.

Muscles in his neck strained as he clenched his jaw hard. I waited patiently for him to find words. Luca was free with his charms, but when he was pissed off, words disappeared. I failed to teach him how to express his feelings, probably because I wasn’t that good at it myself.

“Having a man in place for the Callahan girl,” he finally started talking. “There has to be another way.”

My little brother was right. There were other ways, but none of them would be as efficient as this one. This one would break the contract and require immediate ramification.

“There are other ways,” I agreed. “But we don’t have time for those.”

As many women as he had, I was surprised that one woman even concerned him. Luca had a habit of changing women frequently. I guess his self-imposed rule of one night max would require you to go through an unhealthy number of women.

“You sure you won’t start a war with Callahan?” Luca challenged. It was a risk, but a necessary one. Callahan would never give up his secret daughter to me. He owed me a debt, and he opted for Margaret to settle it in the form of my bride. The question was whether he’d rather default on it than pay me in the form of his love child.

Áine and Callahan were close. From the moment he found out about her, she was under his protection. When her mother and Callahan got back together, he protected Áine with everything he had. It surprised many crime families, but they knew if they attempted something with her, there would be a hefty price to pay. Likely with their lives.

The marriage arrangement between Margaret Callahan and myself was kept a secret and only a handful of people knew. It was necessary in order to keep anyone from targeting the women.

“It will work out,” I told him. “It has to. Can you go chase down the man and make sure he’s in place?”

Callahan was tired, he wanted out, but he worried about his nephew taking over. He was still too young. I was willing to back him up, let Callahan enjoy his old age with the woman he loved. Connecting the Callahan family and ours would mean security and safety on the East Coast. I fully intended to carry through to the end. Luca and I had sacrificed a lot over our lifetime - our youth, dreams, our innocence. Our hands were tainted with blood.

Our father meant us to be his killers, his dirty errand boys, his leverage… nothing more, nothing less. But we rose above it. We were still killers, but now we killed for ourselves and our own made family. Our family, our friends, our allies. Our half-brother could never understand that sentiment. He was just as selfish as our father was and power hungry above all else. He would continue destroying, torturing until his dying breath.

He’d never see this one coming. Stupid bastard never saw anything coming. Luca and I built a unique empire with the alliances we’d established. Our territories stretched far and wide. If you weren’t with us, you were against us and none of us… not Luciano, not Nico, nor Alessio, Raphael, Alexei, Sasha, or Vasili would stand for someone doing human trafficking in our territories. The entire East Coast, and some, was practically ours.

The last chess piece was being played. New York would be Luca’s and mine. Unfortunately for our brother, he fucked us over, along with Benito, one too many times. It was time to bring him down. Marco, his corrupted state’s attorney, and any other associate of theirs would be destroyed.

They sealed their fate with this latest auction. Nico was using all his resources to chase down information. Poor Bianca. It meant he quadrupled the security on her and the twins. She was probably suffocating, but to her credit, she didn't complain. She just joked around with us that she might need a vacation back at Nonno's. She liked him as much as Nonno liked her.

But it wasn't the right time for vacation. Nico wouldn't risk anything happening to them. Despite the way he went about forcing our sister to marry him, Bianca and Nico worked well together. She was good for him and he worshiped her. If he didn't, Luca and I would kill him. Luckily no need for that extravagance.

My eyes roamed the floor and I spotted Áine sitting at the bar. Margaret was nowhere to be found. Even from here, I could see men throwing glances her way, hoping to get closer to her.

Don't. Fucking. Think. So.

Glancing at my brother who was ready to depart, I asked him one more time, "Will you be okay, Luca?"

He nodded, a gleam of determination in his eyes, and I pondered what it was for. "Perfect," he drawled, his lips curving into a smile that spoke of stupid decisions.

But my mind was too focused on a certain flamed-haired woman to think it through. Without another word, I left the room and took the stairs. I had to force myself not to jump them like goddamn Tarzan going for his Jane. That would be one way to freak people out.

Just as I neared the bar, I watched the man's hand reach for her ass; Áine unaware what was happening behind her. Blind red rage shot through me. I grabbed his hand before it could land on Áine's fine ass, and I gripped it tightly.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I snarled into his ear. Then to make sure he understood I was serious, in one easy motion, I broke his wrist. His scream could be heard even through the loud music.

Áine's head snapped my way, and she watched the entire scene with wide eyes. For a second, I cursed myself since she probably didn't like to see violence. But she didn't even flinch and no words slipped through her lips to defend the guy.

"Consider yourself lucky I didn't break every bone in your body," I growled at the fucker who thought he could touch what was mine. Over his head, I signaled the bouncers to come over. I pushed the idiot off the barstool and he fell onto the ground. "My men will see you out."

The same second, one of them grabbed him by his collar, then lifted him and carried him out like trash. The man forgotten, I turned to face Áine.

"Why are you here alone?" I asked, aware my voice sounded too harsh. She cocked her eyebrow but remained silent. "Where is Margaret?"

Fuck. I wasn't supposed to know her name. Thankfully, Áine didn't pick up on it. Jesus, if others saw me slip like this, I'd never hear the end of it.

She shrugged, reaching for her drink. "Dancing."

My eyes darted around the dance floor. Margaret wasn't there.

"You can't be sitting at the bar alone," I grunted. "Men will get the wrong idea."

Great. I sounded like a nagging husband.

"I can take care of myself," she retorted, not losing her cool. Then her lips curved into a sheepish smile. "Except in elevators. Then I lose my shit."

She tried to joke but the anguish in her tone wasn't missed on me.

"Is this seat available?" I asked her, though it was a moot point. I knew it was available; I had just thrown the man that sat next to her out.

She chuckled. "It is now."

"Can I buy you a drink?" I offered, sitting down next to her and my leg brushing against hers. She didn't pull away.

Lifting her drink up in the air, she answered. “I already have one.”

I signaled the barista who immediately approached. “I’ll have a scotch and another drink for the lady.”

“Another pineapple juice?” she asked, his voice incredulous.

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop a grin from spreading across my face. “Yes, and fresh pineapples.”

Without another word, she went to grab our drinks. Though she might have rolled her eyes, I wasn’t sure. I was too focused on the beautiful red haired woman in front of me.

“Go ahead and laugh,” she mumbled next to me, once the barista was out of earshot.

“I wouldn’t dare,” I told her. “Besides, you know what they say about pineapples, right?”

She blushed, the bright color evident even under the dimmed lights and I got my answer.

“Mmmm.”

I chuckled.

“Áine!” Someone called out from the dance floor and I followed Áine’s gaze. “Come dance with us, maid of honor.”

Throwing a glance my way, Áine downed the rest of her drink and stood up.

“Duty calls,” she said, smiling. “See you around.”

Before she could leave me like dust in the wind, I took her hand. She paused, her eyes lowering to my hand wrapped around her tiny wrist. I didn’t bother removing it, and she didn’t attempt to tug it away.

“Dance with me then.” I should have asked, but my words sounded more like a demand. I didn’t want to chance a refusal though something told me she wouldn’t hesitate to refuse me if she didn’t want to dance with me.

I stood up, towering over her small frame. Her posture was relaxed, unlike the tension in her shoulders when Chad brushed against her accidentally. I didn’t want to appear

threatening to her, but I refused to put distance between us. If she didn't like it, she'd step back or push me away. Though to my delight, she didn't seem to mind.

Her eyes slowly lifted until our gazes met.

"I went back," she murmured softly. I raised my eyebrow in question, not understanding what she was talking about. "To the club," she clarified, clearing her throat. "I went back several times," she admitted.

I closed the small distance between us and bent my head so our lips were inches apart. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

So fucking sorry. Otherwise, I would have kept her. War or not.

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Chapter Thirteen

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ÁINE

I could see the sincerity in his eyes and hear it in his voice. Maybe I was a fool, but I believed him. And I wanted him. I was twenty-five years old, and he was the only man that made me crave physical closeness. A touch.

Our gazes locked, the entire room faded into the background. I couldn't hear anything but the thunder of my own heart. My skin burned all over, the heat from his gaze flushed across my skin.

"Your drinks, sir." The barista's voice interrupted the moment. "And fresh pineapples."

I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

"Thanks," I murmured.

The woman's eyes traveled over me and then back to Hunter, coming to her own conclusion. Then a wide grin hit her face and she gave me two thumbs up before she turned around, and left us to it. This time I actually rolled my eyes. It was hard to resist. *Though it was nice to have her support*, I mused.

I drowned my first drink, then reached for my new one, ignoring the tray of pineapples.

"So, you are familiar with the pineapple theory?" Hunter wasn't letting go of the stupid pineapple discussion. I'd rather he took me to his room and see how far we could go

before I broke down. Or maybe this man could make me forget the world and we'd go all the way.

"What theory?" I gave him a wary look as I tipped my drink onto my lips. He wouldn't dare say it out loud. Right? I mean, it is just bad etiquette. Everyone knows that myth, though whether it is true or not… Well, how in the hell should I know!

"About the pineapple," he added nonchalantly, still standing super close to me. He could melt me into a puddle with his heat. "It makes for a tasty pussy."

I choked, almost spitting my drink out. *So unflattering, Áine*, I scolded myself silently. My cheeks singed, and I was sure they turned crimson. I could practically feel fire flush through every inch of my skin. There might even be steam coming off some parts.

He just smirked at me, knowingly, and I narrowed my eyes on him, though I couldn't keep a straight face. My lips curved into a smile; because for some crazy reason, I found it to be such a turn-on. *Me!*

Not a hint of panic. Nothing! Nada. Just fluttering feelings and slight embarrassment.

I cleared my throat slightly uncomfortable at the questions swarming my mind. After all, I was born British. Americans were less embarrassed about these things than the British. Or maybe it was just me that was too uptight.

Whatever! I might as well find out as much as I could. "Does it work the other way too?" I asked curiously, while every inch of my skin warmed.

Surprise flashed in his eyes, then he threw his head back and laughed, the sound hearty and deep. His dark eyes danced with amusement, and I decided right there and then I liked seeing him laugh; though if I was to bet, I'd say he didn't laugh a lot.

"Only one way to find out," he said, traces of laughter still in his voice. The words were suggestive, but coming from him, it didn't sound creepy or cheesy. I raised my

eyebrow, doing an internal check for the upcoming panic. Nothing.

I shrugged, appearing nonchalant. It wasn't like I would give him a hint that I was new at this. "I'm game," I announced in a soft voice.

My heart raced with adrenaline. I couldn't believe I was doing this. I wasn't a timid or shy person by any means. And I knew my worth. But I also knew I had issues that for some reason just refused to ease over the years. But with this man, Hunter, those issues didn't seem to exist.

"Ladies first then." He pointed to the tray of pineapples. I grabbed a forkful and put it into my mouth. I loved pineapple so it wasn't a hardship at all. It was kind of silly, and I had to wonder which one of the two of us was crazier.

Both of us stood there with a tray full of pineapples on the bar in front of us, like we were starting some kind of pineapple competition.

"Your turn," I told him. "Grab your own fork. I hate sharing silverware."

His lips tugged upwards. "I'm making a note of that," he remarked and followed suit, grabbing his own fork. My heart fluttered at his words, but I refused to put too much value into the meaning of them.

Instead, I watched him raise forkful to his mouth. I never thought watching a man chew would be so sexy. Yet, as I watched his Adam's apple move as he swallowed, wetness pooled between my thighs. This man's neck was beyond attractive. Even without the ink. Add all those tattoos and he was irresistible. I fought the urge to taste him, but it hung heavy and thick in the air.

His gaze was firm and unwavering. All I had to do was drown in his dark eyes and everything faded, but him. I wanted him. For me. It might have been selfish of me but at this moment, I didn't care. He was offering a glimpse of normalcy, and I'd give him my soul to taste it. The passion, his touch, his hot lips.

Maybe I shouldn't be flirting with him, considering what had happened earlier with Chad. Pineapples and insinuation aside, I had never felt any of this with Chad. Besides, Chad had his fun, and I was sure he had plenty of women to console him.

The only one that seemed to work for me was this guy. So I was all in. I put another forkful into my mouth.

With each heartbeat, I grew more turned on and he wasn't even touching me. *Maybe pineapples were good for women's hormones*, I scoffed in my head.

"How long do you think it takes?" I asked him boldly. Yes, I was a virgin, but it didn't mean I was innocent.

"Should I google it?" he suggested, his lips curved into that attractive smile.

I shook my head.

"Agencies track searches," I told him, teasing him. "Can you imagine how embarrassing it would be if it got out?"

His smile spread across his face, his white teeth flashing briefly. After feeling crippled by advances and flirting for years, suddenly it felt freeing, thrilling, and exhilarating to flirt with Hunter. It felt empowering.

My eyes traveled over the room to check for my cousin, but she was still nowhere to be seen. Feeling strangely bold, I returned my gaze to Hunter.

"Are you here alone?"

He nodded, while my heart raced at my boldness.

Unlike other men, Hunter seemed to let me dictate the next steps. Not that I was overly experienced, but I was certain from everything I've seen that men tended to push women into their beds. And I didn't mistake Hunter for a weakling. Everything about him screamed power, ruthless, and a leader. The way he sat, spoke, towered above most of the men in the room.

"I am."

Hopefully, I wasn't reading him wrong. I was ready to just go to his room or mine. It didn't matter to me, as long

as he touched me.

“You want more pineapples?” I questioned. *Come on, make this just a little bit easier on me!*

“I’m done with the pineapples. I’m ready for dessert.” His voice was low and deep, the insinuation of *dessert* making me combust into flames. God, I liked his voice. It was low, gruff, and so sexy, washing over me like waves of the sea.

“Me too,” I said, my eyes lowering to his hands. They were big and strong, the ink of the rose ironically reminding me of my side gig with The Rose Rescue. I barely knew him, but I craved those hands already. They felt safe.

John, my right hand man, helped me during the takeover of Dad’s organization, eliminating the old company and re-starting a new one. Basically, the same organization with the new name. He said the old name was too known. When he asked me to come up with the name… The Rose Rescue came up effortlessly.

The rose on the hand that kept reaching out to me in my dreams.

“Áine,” Hunter said, and I raised my eyes to him. “Pineapples… we can just leave it at sharing pineapples.”

Did he think I was nervous? Backpedaling?

“Your room or mine?” I asked, without hesitation. Hunter’s eyes never moved from my face, like he was studying me, learning every single thing about me just from my expressions. It could be unnerving… except that it wasn’t. And the reasons behind it intrigued me. I felt they were important, buried deep somewhere in my brain yet so far out of my grasp.

He stared at me for an intense five seconds or minutes, I didn’t know. It felt like the longest stretch of time.

I held my breath in anticipation of his answer. I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t want this. This connection with him was real, raw, and I wanted to grab it. Explore it. Go all the

way. For me, this could be a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I certainly didn't intend to waste it.

He nodded, as if he was satisfied with whatever he read on my face. "Mine."

Thank God, I sighed mentally.

His hand came around my waist, and I realized we remained standing the entire time, eating pineapples. Usually I was aware of my surroundings, the necessity of my extracurricular activities. But around Hunter, I tended to just drown in his presence, in the best way possible.

"Let's go," he said softly, his eyes burning with something feral. But I wasn't scared. Far from it.

I followed his lead and we made our way out of the bar and across the hallway. My step faltered seeing the elevator, but before I could open my mouth, he stirred me to emergency exit stairs and relief washed over me.

"Thanks," I murmured.

"Little exercise won't hurt us," he justified with that smirk, and I exhaled a breath of relief. He just earned himself another point with his thoughtfulness.

"Hold on," I stopped. "Let me take my shoes off." He took my elbow and held me as I slipped off my heels. "Okay, I'm ready."

We were taking two stairs at a time, like both of us couldn't wait to get to his room. I knew I couldn't. Damn fear of elevators. We could have been there already. Hunter was in great shape, at least it looked like it. His breathing never changed even five flights in. Mine didn't either, but I couldn't help but be impressed.

I couldn't resist adding some humor to it. "It won't deplete all our energy?" I teased. "Ummm, for other stuff?"

A deep chuckle echoed in the hallway. "I could be on my deathbed and my energy for the *other* stuff wouldn't be depleted." He took my hand into his and pulled me to the right. "This is our floor."

The hallway to our floor was empty and the door closed behind us with a thud. Adrenaline rushed through my veins; my skin was taut with anticipation. My breasts felt tight and heavy, excitement buzzed through my veins. The steps to his hotel room seemed to take forever.

“Áine, are you alright?” Hunter’s voice startled me out of my anticipation haze.

My head snapped sideways, watching him. He better not back out of this one.

“Yes, why?” I breathed out, while the most delicious pulsing thrummed to life between my thighs.

His eyes lowered and I followed his gaze. I was squeezing his hand so hard, my nails dug into his skin.

Instantly I relaxed my grip. “I’m sorry,” I murmured, rubbing the nail marks with my other hand. *Great, now I feel like an idiot.*

His fingers took my chin, his grip firm yet gentle, forcing me to meet his dark eyes. “We don’t have to do this. We can just watch a movie.”

I scoffed with a shaky smile. *Fuck movie*, I wanted to say but swallowed the words.

“I want to,” I said quickly, then immediately clarified. “Do this. No to the movie. Yes to sex.” His gaze told me he wasn’t quick to believe me. Any other man would have ravished me on the steps, the moment we got to the first landing. Yet, this one… Hunter must have been better than most because he seemed keen on considering what was best for me. I had to make him understand. “It’s just…” I cleared my throat uncomfortably. “It is not something I do,” I added in a soft voice. “First and last time was with you two years ago. I don’t do hookups.”

Gosh, I hope I didn’t sound like a total moron. All Margaret did was hookups and men didn’t think any less of it. But for some reason, it was important to me that Hunter understood it wasn’t something I did.

He nodded with a serious expression on his face, and strangely, I felt like he really got it. He understood me.

We stood by the end of the hallway, the double door of his hotel room opened to reveal two guards standing there. My brows arched in surprise. Usually Jack had guards, but he was head of the Irish mafia.

Who was this guy?

“Thank you, Nelson, Fabrizio.” It must have been their dismissal because the two nodded and as we walked in, those two left, the doors firmly shutting behind us and with it, my thoughts on Hunter’s identity.

We watched each other, and something thick and heavy flowed between us. The man hadn’t even taken a step towards me yet, and my breathing hitched. The anticipation drummed in the rhythm of my heartbeat. I was way overdue for this and years of inexperience came crashing down along with eagerness to get caught up. Be like other women my age. And Hunter could give me all that. And more. Oh, so much more. I knew it as well as I knew my name.

His gaze dropped to my lips then returned to his eyes and something sinful flashed in those dark depths. My heartbeat sped up into turbo mode.

“I thought about you.” His words, a rough admission, filled the air between us, and I swore my heart burst into flames. Jesus, was this what love songs and love stories were all about? I saw the love Mom and Jack shared, but I couldn’t quite grasp it. Until now. Such simple words, but they ignited fluttering feelings. Beginnings of something fragile, yet powerful. Was it really as simple as that?

“I thought about you too,” I admitted softly, taking a step closer. “A lot.”

One, two, three breaths and he took my wrists, raising them to place them around his neck. His face was close to mine, his lips a single warm breath away. I breathed him in, the masculine scent of him, what I remembered from two

years ago. His scent was soothing and exciting, invading my lungs and becoming forever ingrained in my soul as *him*.

My chest heaved up and down, my breasts brushing against his suit. The friction felt good and that ache, the starvation for a lover's touch, came back tenfold. Two years ago, when he gave me my first taste of the sensation, he left me starving. For so much more.

I craved him more with every single day that passed by. I learned to suppress it, but now that he was here, it was a desperate need that demanded to be sated.

Lowering my eyelids, I watched his mouth with an aching need pulsing between my thighs. His lips were a breath away. So close but not close enough. The heat and scent of him made me shiver with need.

Healing.

The thought was sudden and irrelevant, yet somehow important. He was key to my healing, to the broken pieces of me I couldn't understand or remember.

He pressed against me, so much bigger and stronger than me. He radiated power, his face hard lines and his inked hands that could easily snap me in half. Yet, I had never felt safer.

I pushed myself against him, following my instinct. He wanted me to be sure, so I would show him. He lowered his head, his nose skimming my neck and I tilted my head to allow him full access. My body never surrendered to anyone with ease like this.

Closing my eyes, I let go of everything and just felt. His body so close to mine. His strength. His warmth. His scent.

His hips pressed against my belly, his hard cock evidence of his desire. *He wants me too*, I thought victoriously. His lips skimmed my neck as he breathed me in, inhaling my skin like it was his oxygen and every part of me shuddered with the intensity of it.

Hunter’s hand snaked around my lower back and lowered further, his large palm spread across my ass, gripping it tighter before hauling me up. Our bodies were flushed together.

His lips were a whisper away, grazing against mine. “You want this?”

Fire burned in his eyes. He could read my body even better than me. He understood it and played it like a fiddler. And I trusted him, so much that it should scare me.

It didn’t.

“Yes,” I breathed.

One word. It was all it took for Hunter’s control to unleash. He clashed his mouth against mine, plunging his tongue past my lips. Our mouths fought for dominance, our breathing heavy. My back pressed against the wall, my hand wound itself into his hair, tugging at the strands as I pressed myself harder against him, grinding against him.

I needed more of him.

With this man, I was normal. My body never froze or fought his touch. No matter what. Our groans mixed, both of us gasping for air as he shoved himself inward, and I felt his hard erection pressing against my stomach.

His lips slid down my jaw and trailed a path of kisses to my throat. He licked the hollow between my neck and lower jaw. Every inch of my skin burned for more of his touch. My whimpers became moans and I arched my back, desperate to be closer to him. This need for him was clawing at me, eager to be satisfied. The way he kissed me, hard and possessive, told me he felt the same kind of urgency.

His hand trailed down my body, over my chest, the touch feather light. Lingering over my breasts, I arched myself into his touch, encouraging him. He pinched my nipples through my ridiculously revealing dress and a loud moan echoed through the room. Encouraged, he lowered his head and sucked my nipple into his mouth. I groaned at the

sensation, leaning my head back against the wall and my eyelids pressed tightly together as I relished in the moment. My fingers gripped his dark hair hard, scared he'd stop. Or even worse, my body would shut down and panic would overtake.

The second his teeth gently bit my nipple through the material a lusty whimper left my lips. This has to be just lust, a boiled down lust that exploded after years of non-functioning. Then why did it feel like something so much more? So much stronger than just raw desire.

His hands skimmed down my body, his palms warm against my skin.

"Áine…" His voice was raspy, hoarse and the woman in me that I thought was broken was glad that he was just as impacted by this as I was. "You are so beautiful."

Peeling my heavy lids open, I found his darkened gaze almost reverent on me. His mouth latched onto my lips and my legs wrapped around his waist as he carried me into another room. A bedroom, I realized.

The moment he put me down on the mattress, he shed his clothes. My own dress hiked up and scrunched around my waist. I went to take it off when his words halted me.

"No, I'll take it off," he rasped, his eyes on fire. "I want the privilege of stripping you naked. Baring every inch of your skin to me." My skin went cold, then flaming hot. No complaints here. "Yes?"

I liked that he asked, rather than assumed. It pulled at some invisible strings inside me, I couldn't understand it myself. But each second around him made me fall deeper and deeper into his safety web.

I nodded and raised my hands, allowing him to swiftly take the material off me and land soundlessly on the ground.

My eyes traveled over his strong, naked body, the ink marking his upper chest, neck, forearms, and hands.

He was beautiful. All man, hard and strong. A toned magnificent chest, six pack abs, muscular thighs and his cock… good God. I hadn't seen many, but I was fairly certain that Hunter was very well equipped. A sweet, throbbing ache pulsed between my thighs.

Scooting closer to him, I trailed my hands down his body. I almost expected my body to freeze at any moment but it never came. This unconditional physical trust was a novelty. I intended to take advantage of it. After all, I was way overdue.

His abs were like marble under my fingertips. My hand traveled lower and lower until I took his hard shaft into my hand. The moment my fingers wrapped around his smooth cock, it jolted in my hand as if it was straining for more of my touch. My heart raced, pumping blood through my veins and my ears buzzed from the adrenaline.

I licked my lips, locking eyes on it as I tentatively stroked his erection, from base to tip in slow movements. I wished I had more experience so I could ensure his pleasure, though he seemed to like what I was doing.

He watched my every move through half-lidded eyes. I slid off the bed and lowered myself onto my knees. Am I really doing this? I never thought I'd willingly kneel in front of anyone, and here I was eager in front of this man. Practically a stranger.

I braced my hand on each hard ass cheek of his and parted my lips, taking him into my mouth. The moment the head of his cock slid between my lips, pushing deeper, I felt him shudder.

"Fuck," he groaned, his eyes darkening into black pools. His reaction sent a surge of power rushing through my veins, and I let the instinct lead me. His hands reached to my scalp, pulling the rubber band out of my hair, letting it cascade down my back. Then his fingers slid into my hair and gripped a fistful. The move possessive and hot. Holding

my mane in his grip, he pushed it aside and I realized he moved it off my face, so he could watch.

The thought of it soaked my panties and a small moan vibrated through my throat. The throbbing ache between my thighs was the sweetest pain. At this rate, I'd orgasm while I was giving him a blowjob.

He pushed himself deeper, hitting the back of my throat and my eyes watered. This man was so in tune with me that he instantly paused, concern on his face. I dug my fingers into his flesh, urging him on. I was unwilling to give up this power trip. This sensation.

He remained still, giving me a moment to get used to his size. Once I adjusted, I slowly started licking and sucking, then built up to a rhythm, my head bobbing up and down.

"That's it," he grunted. "Fuck!"

I moaned, my mouth full of his cock and the throbbing ache between my thighs intensifying with each second. He started moving his hips, thrusting into my mouth faster and harder. His ragged breaths and my noises were the only sounds filling the room, as I watched him lose control. And there wasn't a better sight on this planet.

He came hard, spilling into my mouth and I swallowed his cum. It tasted salty, musky and… tangy? Considering I had never done that, I had no idea whether the pineapples worked. But I loved the taste of him, and I had the inclination to say it had nothing to do with pineapples.

His cock slipped off my lips with a soft pop sound. His scent was all around me - in my nostrils, my lungs, even my bloodstreams. Who in the hell needed drugs when you could get so high on this man?

"I think pineapples were a great idea," I murmured, my eyes raising while I still sat on my knees. It was almost a worshiping position, but the look in his eyes worshiped me.

Pulling me up by my shoulders, he laid me onto the bed, my back hitting soft pillows.

“My turn,” he growled and a shudder rolled down my spine.

I was so aroused, my panties were soaked. He hooked his fingers in them and slowly pulled them down my legs then discarded them. His head was so close to that throbbing ache that I was tempted to lift my hips to close the distance. He inhaled deeply, his eyes closing for a moment.

“You’re aroused,” he murmured the statement.

“Yes.”

“Did you like me fucking your mouth?”

Another shudder, ache between my thighs. “Yes,” I breathed out, parting my legs wider. “I loved it.”

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Chapter Fourteen

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CASSIO

I raised myself onto my elbows, shifting my weight and meeting her gaze. Her eyes turned a darker shade of blue, the color of the deepest oceans, and I swore they glimmered like sapphires. She was magnificent, and I could feel my cock starting to harden again at seeing her naked, sprawled on the bed.

For me.

“Spread your legs wider for me.”

She immediately obeyed and my mouth watered seeing the evidence of her desire. She was dripping wet, totally soaked for me. I parted her lips with my thumb and exhaled against her clit.

I nuzzled my face further between her thighs, pushing my tongue into her entrance. I held her gaze as I circled her clit with the tip of my tongue and her body shuddered with need, the attractive flush coloring her pale skin. I gently nipped at her sensitive bud and her hips raised off the bed. A loud moan vibrated through the room. She was so fucking responsive to me, it was addictive. And she tasted just as I remembered. Sweet and mine.

I lapped over her clit and her hips jerked upwards. Her fingers scraped over my scalp, holding me hostage between

her thighs. Like I would go anywhere. For the past two years, this was all I craved for. This was all I worked for.

My mouth latched onto her clit and her hands gripped my hair tighter. She enjoyed this, her hips lifting off the bed and pressing her pussy into my face.

She thrashed underneath me, her body tensed as I continued circling my tongue over her clit, inhaling her sweet scent.

It didn't take long before she was grinding against my mouth, chasing her own orgasm as I lost myself in the delicious taste of her. There was no letting her go; no matter what. She was mine and I was hers. I knew two years ago that a fleeting moment with her would never be enough. I needed her forever, to always have her with *me*. It was my one selfish act, and I refused to let her go.

My name slipped through her lips on a moan and nothing had ever sounded better. She came apart hard, bucking against my face, and I held her ass up to my face so I could continue lapping her up. Her body shuddered against my tongue as she kept grinding against my tongue.

And suddenly I realized. My whole life, all the shitty years, they were all worth it because they led me to *her*.

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Chapter Fifteen

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ÁINE

Goosebumps scattered up my spine and through every inch of my skin. I saw stars behind my eyelids as my pleasure reached higher and higher. Finally! I wanted this man. *Forever!* This feeling forever. As my orgasm subsided, I slowly peeled my eyelids open and met his gaze. And holy hell.

Our eyes locked, my fingers still in his black hair, his face glistening with the evidence of my orgasm. It was the most erotic sight I had ever had the fortune of glimpsing.

My orgasms belonged to him. From my first one to my last one. No questions asked.

The intensity in his eyes blazed, matching the inferno in my veins. He crawled up my body, leaned in and brought his mouth to mine, pausing close enough where his lips were barely brushed against mine. He remained still, waiting for me. For my permission. I closed the gap between us and as I took a sweet pull on his lower lip, I tasted myself on him. Heat that still pulsed through my veins ignited and spread like fire.

A pure, unadulterated *need* that only he could sate.

He just gave me the best orgasm of my life, and I was ready for another. It would never be enough with him. Our

kiss turned deeper, and I melted into him as his tongue danced against mine.

My pulse drummed between my legs as he lazily explored my mouth, sucked on my tongue. He savored me like a delicacy. His arms braced on the bed on each side of me, but his weight on me was delicious. My hips arched up, rubbing against his hard body, feeling his hard erection pressing against my stomach. The air pulsed in sync with our heartbeats; two hearts beat as one.

I ran my nails down his back, holding on to him, urging him on. My breathing grew ragged as I writhed underneath him, panting and moaning his name against his lips. I whimpered, moving my hips up, my body telling him what I wanted. His hand slid down my body, caressing my nipples.

“Hunter, please,” I breathed against his lips. “Don’t make me wait.” I waited so damn long.

I opened my legs wider, the message that I needed him inside me loud and clear. He positioned himself at my slick entrance, his shaft hard and hot. Anticipation coiled within me like hot metal and the ache between my legs demanded to be eased. I could feel the tip of him pressed against my throbbing sex. He pushed the tip of it inside me, and for the briefest second, my body tensed.

He immediately stilled. *No, no, no*. *Don’t stop*! I wanted to scream.

My eyes raised to his dark pools, to find him watching my face.

“Hunter?” I breathed out softly.

He shifted up slightly, taking in my naked body, then returning back to my face. “Just say the word,” he murmured. “And I’ll stop.”

It was ridiculous that I needed his assurance at my age. And his words meant more than the whole world. I didn’t want him to stop, though I felt I should probably give him a fair warning.

I swallowed hard, worried what reaction my next words would bring.

“This will be my first time,” I murmured, slightly embarrassed. If he started questioning me, I worried the moment would just vanish into smoke.

He watched me for two heartbeats that seemed to go on forever. Then understanding passed his expression and his forehead lowered against mine.

“It will hurt a bit,” he warned. It would be comical if it was happening to anyone else but me. I fought and killed, dreamed of bloody screams and scenes that nightmares were made out of. And this wonderful man was warning me that my first time might hurt.

It will be worth it, I wanted to say, but instead I pulled him closer, urging him on. My nails dug into his back as he entered me slowly, his size stretching me. There was so much pain. A slight burning.

“Relax, Butterfly.” His voice was strangled as he moved in deeper, slightly harder. I just wanted him to push in all the way, instead of doing it slowly, letting me adjust. I watched as his forehead creased and his eyes turned darker than midnight. I forced myself to relax, focused on his face.

He moved in even deeper, the pain subsiding and being replaced with the pleasure. He pushed beyond my barrier and hit that sweet spot and it was unlike anything I’d ever felt before.

“That’s it, Vita Mia.” He called me *his life*. I didn’t speak Italian, but I understood that endearment. So many feelings hit me at that moment, it almost choked me. I wasn’t even an emotional person. Yet, at this very moment, I felt so much it was almost overwhelming.

He started to move faster, pumping in and out of me. Each time he pulled out and then thrust back in, my breath left me on a whimper. He was overwhelming me in the most

delicious way, the feelings in my heart growing stronger with each heartbeat.

I lowered my gaze and watched our bodies move as one. There was no room for shyness, no room for escape, just to give into him. This man that finally brought me a lover's touch, I hungered for. He gave me the world and he didn't even know it.

Intensity grew with each pump, his stomach muscles tightened with each thrust and the power in his eyes burned right through me. I burned right along with him.

My nails dug into his flesh as pleasure surged inside me. It was right there, building and building. It would erupt like a volcano any second. Another thrust, the grind of his pelvis against me, and I burst into a million stars. Shuddering violently, I let go, giving into the sensation and counting on him to catch me. His thick cock moved at a piston pace and though I had never been fucked before, I knew nobody would have ever fucked me so thoroughly. *So completely*.

I cried out in pleasure and my entire body trembled, shudders rolling through my body as my insides clenched around his cock. He moved faster and harder, going in even deeper. The next second, he slammed into me hard and held himself deep inside me.

"Fuck. My Áine." Yes, *his*. His eyes shut tight and all of his muscles seized as he spilled himself inside me. His head tilted back as my name slipped through his lips on a guttural moan and he continued to slide slowly in and out, releasing his body of every single drop of cum. Inside me.

The stillness followed, the silence broken by our labored breathing and my body still shuddering with waves of pleasure. This was *wow*. Better than I could have ever imagined! Hunter was still buried deep inside me, his weight on me an odd comfort. I didn't realize my eyes were closed until I felt his lips on my forehead.

I had never felt closer to someone like this before. My eyelids felt heavy as I opened them.

“How are you feeling?” he rasped, his eyes firmly on me. He studied me for any hints of distress but there were none. I was in orgasm heaven.

I met his gaze and smiled. “Like I just had the most amazing sex.”

He lowered his head and kissed my lips softly, the tenderness piercing through my soul and straight to my heart.

“Ah, Vita Mia,” he murmured. “This is just the beginning.”

HUNTER WAS FAST ASLEEP, HIS FACE TENSE EVEN IN HIS SLEEP. The bedside lamp was on, throwing the glow over his tanned skin. I listened to his even breathing, finding comfort in it. My racing heart eased up with each breath he took.

Another dream. Another nightmare. I learned a long time ago to stop screaming through my dreams. If only I could control my heartbeat that frantically pounded with fear.

I focused my eyes on the man next to me. A complete stranger, but he didn’t feel like one. He smelled wonderful, the perfect mixture of the ocean and deep forest. Like freedom and safety. It calmed me unlike anything else. It was better therapy than seeing my therapist.

The sheet came up to his lower torso, covering the bottom half of his body. My eyes roamed over his golden chest full of tattoos and scars. I had to fight the urge to reach out and touch his skin, feel the scars under my fingertips. Hunter was beautiful despite the scars scattered

across his chest. Somehow those made him harder and rougher but not in a bad way.

He must have had a hard life, yet he offered softness. There was something to be said about a man like that and made me love him even more. My heart skipped a beat. Was it possible to fall this fast for someone? Maybe I was just biased because he was the only man that could touch me without my body and mind crumbling into panic.

I shifted out of bed, keeping my movements silent and slow. There would be no sleep tonight. Once the nightmare appeared, sleep became impossible. I found my panties and dress hanging off the coffee table. Throwing a glance over my shoulder, I found Hunter still sleeping soundly. I quickly put my panties on then followed up with my dress.

I had no idea what time it was, but I worried Margaret would lose her shit if she came back to the room and found it empty. Grabbing my shoes, I tiptoed out of the room and the suite with shoes in my hands.

It was a walk of shame, but I didn't feel ashamed at all. It was the best night of my life. Hands down. I'd repeat it in a heartbeat.

As I opened the door to the suite, I found two men standing there and instantly my cheeks burned red. Okay, okay. Maybe the walk of shame was more about people seeing you rather than you walking.

Though I'd give it to these two men. They kept their expression neutral, not a single emotion on it.

I cleared my throat and offered a smile. "Ummm, good night." I wanted to ask them to relay a message to Hunter, but suddenly, it felt kind of awkward. Say what? The guard waited as if he expected me to give him a message, which in turn made me wonder how many times they took a message from a one night stand.

"More like good morning, Miss," he replied when I said nothing else, and with a quick nod, I strode away.

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Chapter Sixteen

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ÁINE

I entered the room I shared with Margaret to find her frantic on the phone. The second she spotted me, she barked into the phone.

"She just came in. We'll be there in forty minutes."

I cocked my eyebrow, striding to my phone, which I left in our room last night. To my horror, I found twenty miss calls from Margaret and John, as well as way too many texts.

"Where in the hell were you?" she screamed. Okay, this was what happened to teenagers, not twenty-five year old women that just lost their virginity. "I was going out of my mind. Worried sick."

I rolled my eyes. "Why? You do this all the time."

"Yeah, but you never do. The girls said they saw you walk away with some scary looking dude."

I scoffed. Hunter was a gorgeous looking dude. Scary, yes, but also a gorgeous looking scary dude. Why did they let out the most important adjective?

"I hung out with someone," I told her, but I couldn't keep the grin from spreading across my face. We did so much more than hang out, but I'd keep that piece of information for myself.

“You what?” Margaret’s expression was comical. She was right, I never did this, and I couldn’t wait to see Hunter again. I just left him for Pete’s sake and butterflies fluttered in my stomach in anticipation of seeing him again.

“Anyhow, tell me what is going on?” I questioned her. “And where do we need to be in forty minutes?”

“At the airport,” she muttered, an incredulous expression still on her face. “John and the crew are picking us up on the way to the Mexican border. There is a shipment coming through Arizona and we are right here.”

Tension crept up my spine and into my shoulders. Would the shipments of women ever cease? It would be nice if it could all end, and the world was rid of men that thought they could profit off the pain of others. The dark part of me made me want to collect all those men and dish out pain they bestowed on others. Days, weeks, months of torture until they succumbed to feeling nothing but void and a dark hole where only pain existed. See how the motherfuckers liked that.

Forty minutes later, both Margaret and I climbed up the stairs to the private jet, showered and geared up. Most importantly, caffeinated.

“Why won’t you tell me?” she whined as we entered the cabin. The private jet was owned by The Rose Rescue and had no markings. It was the way I preferred it. Blending in. When my father ran the organization, he had his logo blasted all over the place. I wouldn’t repeat the same mistake. As far as anyone was concerned, we were some thrill seeking idiots traveling incognito. “I tell you everything,” she grumbled.

“Where did you disappear to last night?” I asked her.

An attractive blush crept up her neck and into her cheeks. When I blushed, I looked like a blotched tomato. Margaret looked just cute.

“I asked first,” she objected, avoiding my eyes.

Gotcha ya! I thought smugly.

“I’ll tell you when you tell me,” I told her as I sat down in my seat.

A small protest came through her lips and her eye roll followed. “Any other time I would,” she grunted.

I shrugged. I never usually asked with whom she hooked up. She spilled it before I could even think to ask the question. But today, she was tight lipped. Whoever it was, she did not want him known.

“Okay you two,” John grumbled. “Are we going to talk about wild nights and boyfriend bullshit or will we talk business?”

Margaret and I shared a glance, rolling our eyes. “Business,” we answered in unison.

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Chapter Seventeen

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CASSIO

"Do you ever sleep, brother?" Luca grumbled as I woke him up. I charged into his bedroom a minute ago and gave him five minutes to get ready. I sat on the couch, giving him time to get his training gear on.

"We slept plenty," I told him, slightly agitated. Okay, maybe more than just slightly. The frustration burned beneath my skin. Nico would have a field day if he saw me. Or even worse Luciano. They'd laugh their asses off. Until I beat them senseless.

Áine had snuck out of my room after our night together and disappeared. Fucking disappeared! Nobody had seen her all day yesterday. And last night was agonizing without her. One night! It was all it took for me to get hooked. I couldn't get enough of her. The empty space in my chest would forever be filled with her.

The memories from eleven years ago flashed in my mind. The girl had grown into a woman. She was mine; she just didn't know it yet. I sensed the invisible scars she carried around. I wasn't even sure whether she knew herself how deep they ran.

Fuck!

I was a light sleeper. Years of attempts on my life forced me to sleep with one eye open. How in the hell did she

leave my room without me ever stirring? I worried about her, whether she was okay after everything we did. I sensed her tense at certain moments and I ensured to give her a chance to stop me. What if I missed a sign?

Be a man worth loving, my mother's words echoed in my brain.

Not like Benito! I fucking hated any resemblance to my father. I took a deep breath in, reining in my emotions. Instinctively, I knew Áine trusted me. She melted into my embrace, and as we kissed, my entire world faded out. All the blood on my hands, past sins of my father… all gone, leaving me alone with the woman I was born to be with.

"What is up your ass?" Luca muttered.

I shook my head, pausing my train of thoughts. "Let's put in our miles before we catch the plane," I grunted as I scanned through all the reports from our European businesses and routes, waiting for him.

I'd much rather dedicate myself to a different kind of exercise but this would have to do since my woman vanished on me.

It was important we stayed in shape. Yes, we had men to fight for us, but it didn't mean I'd let myself get weak. Or that they would fight all our battles. When it came down to it, Luca and I could defend ourselves and not depend on someone else. We were nothing like Marco who hid behind his guards, 24/7. They even kept watch while he slept or tortured innocent women. It made me sick to my stomach.

Ten minutes later, I pressed the button waiting for the elevator. Each time I stepped into the lift now, it reminded me of Áine from two nights ago and her panic attacks. According to the receptionist, they would be leaving today. So would we. With the warehouse leveled and kidnapped women nowhere to be found, we had to get back to New York and to our businesses. I had a team of men looking for any trace of those women, yet they came up empty. Like

they vanished without a trace, and I worried they were inside that building when it exploded.

More death on my hands, I thought wryly.

The elevator door slid open and both of us stepped through, then the lift started its descent into the private gym. I ensured every one of my hotels had a private gym for us. Only my brother and I had access to those, along with selected special guests. There was another gym for general guests.

We walked in silence and I swiped my finger print across the pad, the door immediately opening. That's when I saw her.

"Seems you have something in common with that girl," Luca mocked me.

My eyes locked on the woman on the treadmill. Áine was jogging, wearing nothing but tight, sports shorts that hugged her butt and a sports bra. She must have been at it for a while, because sweat glistened off her light skin, her red hair up in a high ponytail. She had wireless headphones, watching a show on the screen.

Even from here, I spotted her butterfly birthmark. Against her pale skin it was impossible to miss it. Somehow it fit; she had gone through some struggles and prevailed.

Strong! The word that came to my mind each time I thought of her.

Soft humming traveled over, her whole posture relaxing despite her physical activity. She looked even younger than her twenty-five years. I watched her maintaining her running speed, her breathing even, and I wondered how long she had been in the gym. It was barely five in the morning.

My eyes roamed down her body. She wasn't skinny but had a strong slim body with curves exactly where you'd want them on a woman. And now that I knew how those curves felt under me, I was hooked for life and never letting go. Being around her made me forget my blood

stained hands, my black marred soul, and bask in her presence.

Áine was able to stir things in my chest that no other woman ever had. She was all I needed in my life - my redemption and my salvation. And over the last two years, she has been my obsession. I longed to trace her curves, touch every single inch of her body, and take my time knowing her likes and dislikes.

Two nights ago, our touch was hungry and greedy. Next time… and by God, there would be a next time even if it killed me… I'd take my time with her.

Soft words stopped my train of thought, realizing she was singing along to whatever she was listening to on her headphones as she watched the show on the screen. The tunes sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place them.

Is it too good to be true;

I want this so much…

I'm stuck in the blue

The words struck and the scene from two years ago flashed in my mind. Same song, different place. The night I realized why we ever crossed paths. I saved her and she saved me.

Two years ago, I finally knew what I wanted from Callahan. I should feel guilty about what I was about to do, but I didn't. Áine stirred something deep inside me that I long thought dead. I wanted to preserve it; I needed to preserve it. Otherwise, I feared I'd become just like my father.

I was so lost in my thoughts, I didn't notice she stopped her treadmill and stepped off of it.

"Holy shit," she exclaimed, stumbling back upon spotting both Luca and me. "Where in the fuck did you come from?"

I felt my lips curve into a smile at her not so delicate words. "Through the door," I told her. "Good morning."

Her hand was still on her chest, trying to calm her heart. “You scared the daylights out of me.”

“Sorry.” Truthfully, I didn’t expect to see her so early. This made it obvious that I only knew facts about Áine, but not her habits and likes. *Soon!*

“Did you have a good workout?” Luca asked her. “I thought this dude was the only lunatic that got up at the crack of dawn to work out, but apparently there was another lunatic around.”

She smiled, despite her hand still being on her chest and slightly labored breathing.

“Well, you are up as well,” she retorted dryly. “So you must be a lunatic too.”

Her eyes flickered my way, and honest to God, I wanted to knock my brother out cold so I could stalk towards my woman and claim her all over again. Right here and right now! So much for taking it slow.

“He woke me up, so I’m not in the same bin as you two looneys,” Luca muttered, bumping his shoulder against mine. I was too tense though so he didn’t get the desired effect. He stumbled instead of me.

Áine’s eyes twinkled as her gaze traveled to me. “I think you should make him run an extra ten miles for calling us looneys.”

I grinned. “I intend to.”

“I would totally watch,” she teased. “But I have to shower and catch a plane.”

The image of her in the shower was totally what I didn’t need. Yet, here I was imagining it anyhow. Goddamn it, I had to talk to her first. I needed another kiss to carry me over the next few weeks.

“I guess you are going to miss my torture session,” Luca chuckled.

She strode towards us, pulling on a sweatshirt over her head. “Unfortunately. Enjoy it though.”

Her step faltered next to me, and I took her wrist into mine. “You have a second?”

She tilted her head and nodded. I wished she swooned a bit more. Typically, when I didn’t want it, I got it over the top. Now when I wanted it, my woman was acting all reasonable and cool.

“Can I come too?” Luca interjected and I shot him a glare.

“Just get started with your miles,” I said. “I’ll catch up.”

“Sure you will, old man,” he spat back, flipping me the bird.

Áine chuckled. “Let me guess. Brothers?”

I grinned, pulling her along through the door. “I’m the better brother.”

“I’m sure,” she teased.

The second we were out of Luca’s sight and earshot, I turned her around and pressed her back against the wall. A soft gasp escaped her but the next second her hands wrapped around my neck, pulling me closer.

“You disappeared on me,” I said, searching her eyes for any hint of regret, worry of what we had done. There was none.

“Sorry I snuck out,” she apologized, her face inching closer to mine. “I was going to search you out but then some stuff came up for work. I flew out just for the day and came back well past midnight.”

Pressing my body against her, her breathing hitched slightly and her eyes darkened into deep blue oceans. It was addictive to watch desire linger in her eyes. The irritation that burned hot over the last day finally dissipated.

I pressed my hips against her belly, giving her a taste of what she did to me. She slightly parted her legs, a soft moan slipping through her lips. I inhaled her scent deep into my lungs. I’d need it until she was mine. I grazed my lips over her soft neck, trailing kisses along it.

“I’m all sweaty from the workout,” she rasped, tilting her neck to the side to allow me better access. So responsive.

I trailed my tongue from the sensitive spot on her neck and up to her chin, stopping close to her mouth. “You taste and smell delicious.”

Grazing my lips against hers, she parted her mouth. Her lips were so soft and warm, they’d melt the ice. I wanted to keep her. To hell with all my plans and schemes.

“Hunter?” she murmured against my lips, her voice soft.

“Hmmm.”

“Do you live in New York?” I watched her for a few intense seconds before nodding. She chewed on her bottom lip, as if she was nervous.

“Say what’s on your mind, Áine,” I said.

“I live in New York too,” she murmured. “If you want to get together or-”

One thing was certain. Áine Evans wasn’t the sit and wait type of girl. I loved it.

“Give me your cell number.” She recited it, and I immediately put it into my phone. “I’m sending you a text so you have my number.”

She leaned into me, pressing a kiss against my cheek. “I have something going on with my Mom and stepdad next week, but other than that, my calendar is open. Unless something urgent comes up with work. I’ll text you in a few days,” she suggested with hope.

“You better.” Her soft lips fit perfectly against mine. Her tongue hot and wet, her small sighs feeding my lungs.

She didn’t know it, but I would be seeing her a lot sooner than she thought.

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Chapter Eighteen

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CASSIO

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Four Weeks Later

Luca and I pulled up in front of Nico's large manor in Maryland where my sister and nieces now lived permanently. Bianca tried her best to convince Nico they should all live in her Gibson Island house, but he refused. I completely agreed. That place was a security nightmare and after she was kidnapped late last year, he was even more diligent on the security. He tightened the security on every single property and around his family.

"How is my favorite sister?" I strode into the kitchen. It was usually where Bianca spent most of her time. It was amazing how easily she missed visitors when she was engrossed in her cooking and baking. It was good Nico had this entire place surrounded by guards.

I looked her over. She looked happy, practically glowing. She and Nico had been married for barely six months. It felt good to see them happy together. Slowly, the families that we all always craved became reality. Nico had gotten my sister who he had wanted for years. Luciano and Grace worked out their years of troubles and were now expecting another child.

Bianca came up to me, wiping her hands on a dishtowel, and placing a kiss onto my cheek.

"Hello Cassio," she greeted me. Her gesture reminded me of my Sicilian aunts. "And Luca. My two favorite

brothers.”

She kissed Luca next. After everything that has happened, Bianca let Luca and I be part of her and the twins' lives. It meant more than she’d ever comprehend. We became closer and somehow life became better. I hoped with Áine it would get even better.

“You know, we are your only brothers,” Luca retorted dryly.

“Do you know I’m your only sister?” She shook her head, smiling.

“Touché,” I said. Regardless, she was our favorite family relative. The twins and Bianca became important to all of us.

She stepped back, observing both of us. “Is everything okay?”

“Why do you ask that every time you see us?” Luca rolled his eyes. He picked up that habit from our sister. She was a worrier. I knew she couldn’t help it; not after the shitstorm she went through since being thrown into our world.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she murmured. “Maybe because wherever you go, trouble follows. What is going on?”

Bianca might not have any relations to my mother’s side, but she behaved like them through and through. Always worrying about the people she loved; always feeding them; always ensuring they were taken care of during the holidays.

During her honeymoon to Italy, Nico and she stopped to visit my family in Sicily. Luca and I had the pleasure of babysitting our nieces, and it was one of the best weeks of our lives. It worked out for the best. Nico and Bianca needed time alone after her kidnapping; Luca and I needed time to get our nieces used to us. Our family in Sicily was enamored with my sister while my brother and I were wrapped around our nieces’ middle fingers. Bianca had been adopted and the fact she killed that bastard of our

father earned her extra points. Not that she was going for them considering what her mother went through.

“Where are the twins?” I asked her instead.

I wasn’t about to tell her that I’d asked Nico to retrieve every detailed piece of information on Áine. I checked my soon-to-be-wife’s travel schedule over the last few years and her business trips were frequent and not only for HC Architecture. She spent a lot of time in unlikely destinations, and I wanted to know why.

I had learned a few extra things about Áine since Las Vegas. She was a workaholic, smart as a whip, and wasn’t afraid of anything. Except elevators, as she liked to remind me. We’d been texting frequently over the last four weeks. Some days more than the others. And then she tended to go radio silent. The first time she did it, I was ready to fly out to Europe and tear Croatia apart, stone by fucking stone. I thought something happened to her.

She was overseeing a project in Croatia, and then on her second day there, she turned off her phone and put me through hell. She had to do a quick day trip. At least it was the excuse she gave me. Except, it didn’t add up. I owned HC Architecture and there was no record of needed trips during the project in Croatia. My gut was warning me Áine was hiding something,

“In school.” She glanced at the clock, absentmindedly rubbing her belly. I suspected I knew what it meant but waited for her and Nico to finally say it. “Nico is picking them up, so they’ll be home soon.”

She tilted her head at both Luca and I. “Why don’t you sit down? I’ll get you something to eat.”

I rest my case, I thought wryly. *Always tries to feed us*. But it meant she cared about us, so I’d take her infinite feedings. My lips curved into a smile. Bianca had a way of making us all feel at home. Always.

“No complaints here,” Luca muttered, flopping down. “I love your cooking.”

She chuckled, bringing both of us a lemonade and water.

“What the hell is this?” Luca muttered, eyeing the lemonade like it was poison. I had to bite the inside of my cheek. Nico told me Bianca became obsessed with Nonno’s lemonade recipe and kept trying to replicate it. Needless to say, everyone was sick and tired of lemonade.

Our sister completely missed Luca’s horrific tone and smiled. “It’s lemonade. I think I’m pretty close to your grandfather’s recipe. Try it.”

Luca groaned. “Isn’t there alcohol in it?”

“Haha,” she retorted dryly. “Just drink it or I’ll starve you.”

She turned to fix our plates. Truthfully, I wasn’t much into eating, but I knew Bianca would fidget until I ate something. Ever since she moved into Nico’s place, it always smelled like cookies on this side of the house. She took it upon herself to bake cookies for all of Nico’s men.

Luca and I sat down at the little table in the kitchen. No sense in having Bianca run back and forth to the dining room. Besides, once Nico was here, I needed him and if my sister was in the kitchen, less likely she would hear our conversation.

As she fussed around, I noticed her glancing Luca’s way several times. A question was coming his way.

“So how is everything in…” she trailed off, chewing her bottom lip nervously. “-mmm, you know, in the mafia?”

She worried about the repercussions after what had happened with Benito. Nico gave both Luca and me a heads up that she was scared they’d come after Luca. Only one person tried but he’d be dead soon.

“Nothing to worry about,” Luca told her with a wide grin. “And certainly nothing your awesome cooking cannot make better.”

It didn’t appease her. She had come to know Luca too well and how he hid everything with his easy manner.

“Well, I don’t believe you,” she retorted, a stubborn tilt to her chin. “I swear Luca, if I find out there is some backlash going on, I will blast a Facebook post stating I did it.”

Both Luca and I choked on our drinks.

“Don’t even think about it, Sister,” I warned her, my throat still raw.

“Just because you call me sister, Cassio,” she growled, “doesn’t mean you get to tell me what to do. I think with my own head, thank you very much!”

I knew she did; she was fiercely independent.

“You are joking, right?” Luca asked her in a hesitant voice. “You wouldn’t actually put an admission in writing.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, maybe Facebook is not the best place. But I’ll find a mafia blog or some shit like that.” She narrowed her eyes on Luca. “You will tell me. Right, Luca? I appreciate what you are doing, but if it means doing it at the risk of your life, it is not right. We can figure something else out.”

I cocked my eyebrow. “Like what?”

She shrugged. “Well, we could kill all the bad guys.”

My sister was on a roll today.

“Don’t worry, *Sorella*,” Luca told her with his charming smile. He loved calling her sister in Italian. “If it comes to that, we can team up and kill all the bad guys together.”

“I know you are dodging,” she muttered under her breath as she carried on with preparing a plate of food. “A blind man can see it.”

She was too perceptive. Maybe it was the gene we shared. Perception, temper, her dark hair and dark eyes - something we inherited from our father. Though temper might be just the Italian in us. The hate for him, on the other hand, we grew and nurtured on our own. Bianca was the kindest and the best of the three of us and even she hated him. There was something to be said about that.

Bianca lowered the plates full of cookies and mini-sandwiches in front of us. I raised my eyebrow. She went all out. They were shaped in bowties. Luca immediately shoved one into his mouth.

“This is good, Bianca,” he commended. “What’s the deal with bowties?”

She shrugged, lowering herself on the empty chair. “Just experimenting with different things. For Grace’s baby shower.”

“I thought she was having a girl?” Luca blurted.

Bianca just rolled her eyes. Leaning backwards and her hands back on her stomach, her eyes came to me. She had a keen way of picking up on emotions.

I was always happy to visit my sister, but today, I really needed Nico. I needed answers and Nico was the only one with vast enough resources to be able to get those answers for me.

“Is everything okay, Cassio?” she questioned.

For a second, I considered lying to her. I knew she’d grill me to death once I told her I was about to get married.

“I’ll be getting married soon,” I ended up saying.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise, but before I could say anything else, Luca chimed in. “Assuming she doesn’t run away.”

I frowned. Luca could sometimes have such a big mouth. Though right now, it didn’t escape me he did it on purpose.

Bianca’s eyes turned a few shades darker. “Am I to guess that you are forcing her?”

“Not exactly,” I muttered.

“Yes,” Luca answered when it wasn’t exactly necessary.

She leaned back and disappointment flashed on her face.

“What is it with you guys and forcing women to marry you?” she muttered.

“I don’t fucking know,” Luca answered with a grin. “But you can bet your ass I am not doing it. Doesn’t that make

me your favorite brother?”

Bianca chuckled softly. “We shall see.” She turned her eyes my way and tilted her head. “Did it ever occur to any of you that maybe you could wine and dine the woman you want to marry? Take her on romantic dates, get on one knee, and propose. You know, give her a choice.”

Nico saved me from answering. “That takes too long, Cara Mia.” Her head whipped around and her smile turned soft, seeing her husband and twins come through the door.

“Uncle Cassio, Uncle Luca.” Our nieces both screamed in unison and ran to us.

I lifted them both into my arms. “What have you been eating?” I joked. “You grew another few inches. You’ll be taller than Luca and me.”

They both giggled and left me for Luca. They knew he always came prepared with toys. Freaking dude kept toys in the car since he found out we had nieces. *Just in case*, he would say.

Nico lifted his wife’s small body, sat down and placed Bianca on his lap, wrapping his arms around her and his hands on her thighs. That guy just couldn’t stop touching my sister!

“Hello, wife.”

She nuzzled into him, and the brotherly part of me wanted to punch Nico and demand he kept his hands to himself. But I knew it wouldn't work. Besides, Bianca was crazy about Nico and couldn’t keep her hands to herself either.

“Girls, how about I get some of your kisses?” Bianca complained through a smile on her face. “After all, I *am* your mother.” Both girls ran to her, gave her peck on the cheek and rushed back to Luca.

“Do you have something for us, Uncle?” Hannah questioned. It was hard to tell them apart though I was getting better at it.

“What?” Luca acted hurt. “I’m not a good enough present?” But he couldn’t keep his face straight with all their giggles. “Fine, I have something for you. It is in the car.”

Before Luca could get up, they took off. “We got it, Uncle Luca.”

And they left us like dust in the wind.

“You have to stop bringing presents every time you see them,” she scolded him. “They’ll expect it, and it is not right.”

Luca shrugged. “They can expect it, and they will get it.”

Bianca rolled her eyes. “Wait and see how expensive that gets.”

My lip twitched. Nico was one of the richest men in the States and she worried about money.

Bianca’s eyes returned my way. “Try asking her out, Cassio,” she tried again, reverting to our original topic. “Instead of forcing marriage like some other people I know.”

She gave her husband a pointed look.

“Once they’re married, Cassio can take her out on dates for the rest of his life,” Nico retorted. His hand came up to my sister’s belly and it confirmed my suspicion. “And charm her for the rest of her life. That was *my* plan.”

A giggle escaped her. “You guys are incorrigible,” she scolded. “I mean, look how horribly it went for Luciano. I hate to tell you, Nico, but it didn’t go that great for you either.” Bianca’s hands snaked inside her husband’s blazer. “Though I am happy now, it caused a lot of anguish and unnecessary doubt.” Bianca’s eyes came to me. “Does that make sense?”

“She wouldn’t marry me if she had a choice,” I admitted reluctantly. “The idea of being Mrs. King will sicken her.”

Bianca watched me curiously. “Why?”

“She hates all Kings,” I muttered. “Thanks to our dear father. And to make things even better, she was kidnapped

and tortured when she was fourteen. It was orchestrated by Benito. Her memory has been wiped, but I'm positive it will come back."

Bianca gasped and understanding passed her expression.

"Yes, maybe not the best scenario," she admitted reluctantly. "I still don't agree with forcing her to marry you." She shook her head. "Who is it anyhow?"

"Áine Callahan."

She gave me an odd look.

"Do you mean Áine Evans?" Her question surprised me. "That name is very unusual and I only ever heard it once."

"You know her?" If she did, maybe she could put in a good word for me. I groaned silently. Good word or not, Áine would be my wife.

"She interned for a real estate company for a few months. It was during our college years." She turned her eyes to Nico. "Yours, actually." Nico nodded; we both knew it. Though her connection to my sister was a novelty to both of us. "Anyhow, she also did a few weeks for John's construction company. It was how we met. We hung out while she was in town, but then she went back to New York. We stayed in touch but things got busy. For both of us."

"Well, well, well," Luca grinned. "It's a small world."

"Did she date anyone while you guys hung out?" From all the questions, no idea why that one came out?

Bianca shook her head. "No, nothing serious." For a moment she hesitated, like she struggled. "Cassio, please, think about what you are doing. She's a really good person."

"So I shouldn't marry her?" I challenged her, slightly agitated.

She sighed. "I am not saying that. Áine spent the night once at our dorm, my last year of college, and the nightmare she had was-" She searched for words, her eyes

full of emotion. It was what made Bianca so much better than us. She cared about others more than herself. “I don’t know. By how shaken up she was, it was bad. Now that you told me that Benito kidnapped her, it explains it. Don’t make things worse for her.”

I could feel Luca’s eyes on me. Until recently, the two of us were the only ones that knew what happened to her. Not including Áine’s parents. It would seem not even Áine herself remembered. Well, except in her nightmares.

“Cassio will do the right thing, Cara Mia,” Nico comforted her. “How about we tell them the good news?”

A crimson blush crept up Bianca’s neck and her cheeks.

“Don’t think I don’t know you are trying to distract me,” Bianca narrowed her eyes on him, but then a soft smile curved her lips. “But I’ll allow it this time because I already know we won’t see eye-to-eye on this marriage method matter.”

“It’s the reason you are better than us,” Luca muttered affectionately. My brother was, of course, right. Bianca’s mother, despite all that happened, did right by her daughter.

“Umm, okay,” Bianca took a deep breath. “Luca, you’ll have to buy a bigger car if you're going to continue with gifts every time you come to visit.” Luca’s eyebrow lifted in question. “We are expecting.”

My lip quirked.

“Expecting what?” Luca asked, his expression truly quizzical. Our brother was adamant to remain ignorant in regards to Bianca's physical aspect of her marriage. It was probably his coping mechanism, so he wouldn’t kill Nico for sleeping with our sister.

“We’re pregnant,” Nico added, grinning. His hand went protectively over her lower abdomen. “We are expecting twins.”

Bianca’s small hand covered Nico’s.

“A stork is bringing those babies, right?” Luca’s eyes crinkled and his lip corners raised up.

“How did you know?” Bianca played along, amusement shining in her eyes. “We just booked them yesterday.”

Luca just couldn’t stomach anyone banging our sister. I couldn’t go there either. It made my finger itch for my gun.

“I’m happy for you,” I told them both. “I can’t wait to meet them. Do the girls know?”

Bianca smiled dreamily. “We are going to tell them tonight. You know they can’t keep a secret. But we’ve been talking about possibilities for a brother or a sister and both are thrilled. Especially after learning that Matteo will have a little sister.”

“You have to consider the possibility, Áine Evans will fight you,” Luca commented as we entered Nico’s office. While Nico sat down behind the desk, Luca and I took seats opposite of him. “She doesn’t seem ready to settle nor does she seem the type to be told who to marry. She grew up independent. You might want to reconsider your plan, Cassio.”

“Shut. The. Fuck. Up.” My brother was grating on my nerves. Why in the fuck did he suddenly want to be the knight? Bianca was rubbing off on him.

“Of course she isn’t the type to be told who to marry.” Nico rocked back in his chair. “Neither was Bianca. Or Grace. So you make it happen and then make it up to her for the rest of her life. That was my plan.”

It was the wrong thing to say because Luca glared at Nico. “Don’t remind me how you forced my sister to marry you. I should take her to my island.”

Nico flipped him off. “Try to take my wife and you’ll see how fast your empire crumbles,” he threatened Luca. You

could threaten Nico with chopping his cock off and he wouldn't flinch. Give a hint of threat about taking Bianca and he was already digging your grave.

A look on my brother's face told me he was debating whether to push Nico some more, but then he changed his mind. Unfortunately, he decided to push my buttons.

"You should listen to Bianca," he recommended. "Maybe wait and date her for a few years. I mean, look at our sister. Do you want to do to Áine what Nico did to our sister?"

I clenched my teeth. I waited a few years already. Fuck. Everyone. Else. Áine was mine now. Her life intertwined with mine from the moment I saved her. I just never knew she'd become ***the*** woman for me. Maybe it was the whole reason I was meant to save her.

This whole discussion was pointless so I cut it short. Otherwise, Luca would lose his shit and Nico would beat him into the ground if my brother even hinted that she'd be better off without him. The only thing that mattered to me was that Bianca was happy and my nieces were safe. They loved Nico; he loved them.

"Were you able to get any information?" I asked Nico, steering the topic away from our sister.

He reached for a folder and handed it to me. I scanned through the folder with information.

"Cigar?" Nico offered. "Scotch?"

"No, I'm good." I was more interested in reading the information on Áine he was able to dig up. No amount of scotch would satisfy me right now.

"I'll take one of each," Luca accepted. Nico poured them both a glass of scotch, then the two leaned back into the chairs. As they talked, I tuned it all out, reading information on my future wife.

"Why is she traveling to the Middle East, Asia, and Africa so frequently?" I asked nobody in particular. The company she worked for, which happened to be my

company, didn’t take contracts for those geographical areas.

“I found it odd too,” Nico chimed in, his feet up on the table. “Did you know her father… well, the prime minister had a secret side gig?”

I raised my head and studied Nico’s expression. He wasn’t the joking type and this was a big piece of information.

“Go on,” I urged. “What kind of side gig?”

“It was called Eve’s Garden.” I cocked an eyebrow. The prime minister didn’t strike me as a save the planet type. “It is an organization that rescues victims of human trafficking. It must have been the reason Benito targeted the prime minister and kidnapped Áine.”

Nico had vast resources when it came to finding out things about people. When Luca and I went back after rescuing Áine, we leveled the entire place and left no witnesses.

Except the boy. He took Luca’s warning and disappeared. We found him again a few years later, but he didn’t know who Áine and her family were.

“The kidnapping happened in her father’s office building. Her guards walked her to the elevator and she took the lift alone, since her father was waiting for her on his floor. The elevator was stopped between the floors and Áine kidnapped.”

No wonder she had issues with elevators. And because of her memory wipe, she didn’t even know why.

“Is the organization still going?” Luca asked the question that mulled over in my mind.

“When the prime minister died, the organization seemingly ceased to exist.” There was a *but* coming. I knew it. “But I think his daughter continued it, under a different name.” A heartbeat of silence. “There is an organization called The Rose Rescue,” he continued. “Gia has had a run in with a woman that The Rose Rescue saved. They have

their own set up going - save the women, place them in secured shelters, help them get established, and when the women are ready to move on, they help them with that too."

Nico's proclamation sent shockwaves through me. She seemed too gentle to lead a secret organization rescuing women. On one hand, I just couldn't see her doing something so dangerous. But on the other hand, it didn't seem as far-fetched as it should. She was fit; obviously trained vigorously, she had too many unexplainable trips. We talked almost every day, except when she *disappeared*.

As if she heard me, my phone buzzed. I glanced at it and immediately grinned like a damn fool, despite the information I just learned.

Áine: ***How about some sexting? I hear it's a thing.***

I could practically picture the mischievous glint in her eyes as she typed that text and pressed the send button.

Glancing up I caught Nico and Luca eying me. "I have to take care of this. It's urgent."

Luca scoffed. "It looks very urgent."

Ignoring him, I focused on typing my message back while keeping my face expressionless.

Me: ***Next time I see you, I'm going to lick your pussy until you beg me to stop.*** She wanted sexting, I would deliver.

The reply came almost instantly.

Áine: ***Oh, we are doing this now?*** More bubbles as she typed. ***What if I don't beg you to stop?***

Me: ***You will have mind blowing, explosive orgasms. Over and over again, until you are limp in my arms.***

Áine: ***I won't beg you. But I'll return the favor."*** Then the phone buzzed again. Three emojis.

* Eggplant. Tongue. Water drops.*

Okay, maybe I was too old for emojis but I was pretty certain I knew what that meant.

Me: ***You won't have energy left after I make you ride my face.***

Bubbles appeared. Then stopped. Then reappeared.

Áine: ***Okay, this backfired.*** I grinned smugly. ***Now I'm hot. Are you hard?***

Me: ***Butterfly, all I have to do is think about you and I get hard.*** It was true. My dick thickened in my slacks after her first text, which considering I was with Nico and Luca, it wasn't the best thing. If they spot it, they'd never let me live it down. ***When are you back in NYC?***

She had been on the road for the past four weeks. The two days she was actually in the city, I had to travel. You'd think living in the same city, even the same building, we'd run into each other. We never did. Of course, she didn't know I owned her building.

Áine: ***Late next week. Will I see you?***

Me: ***Nothing will stop me.***

Áine: ***I'll hold you to it. Okay, I got to go. Pilot is giving me a murderous look.***

Now that I knew she led an organization, it made sense that she was always traveling. I put the phone back into my pocket and returned my attention to Luca and my brother-in-law.

"Sorry about that." I offered an apology.

"No, you're not," Luca muttered. "If I guess who that was, can I beat your ass?"

"How about I beat your ass whether you guess or not?"

"Okay you two, stop bickering like old ladies." Nico reprimanded us. "Back to business. There is something else," Nico continued. Luca and I waited. "Once you sent us a warning about Marco's final grand belles auction, I hacked into his system. Marco has an agreement with the state attorney for New York, an exclusive offer received by Mr. Chad Stewart. To buy Áine Evans at a reduced price. After Marco breaks her in for him."

A volatile anger stretched in my chest and red swam in my vision. I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw hurt. I'd kill Chad Stewart and Marco. When the time came, I'd especially enjoy torturing those two. I'd break those two motherfuckers, so they could never break another woman again.

"Jesus Christ," Luca muttered. "Will this shit ever end?"

"Not as long as Marco is alive," I gritted.

"Cassio, I have no doubt that Áine is running The Rose Rescue business." I hated to admit it, but I was certain Nico was right. My instinct was confirming it.

"Are you sure?" Luca questioned. "I'm not saying she is a frail woman. I just couldn't see someone that has been through what she has been through willingly go into the battle."

"It's a secret organization so it isn't like there are paper trails, but her travels outside her job coincidentally sync up with a member of the organization that worked for her father."

"Maybe they are having a fling," Luca offered. Sometimes I really had to fight the urge to beat him. The thought of Áine having a fling with any man made my blood burn like Hades. The reasonable part of me knew it made no sense. She was a virgin, melted under my touch, and wasn't shy about telling me she wanted me. It was refreshing and captivating.

"Maybe he's a dead man," I retorted dryly.

Luca rolled his eyes, reminding me of our sister.

"By the way, Nico," I changed the subject. He gave me all the information I needed for the moment. "How did Bianca take the news of the birth control swap?"

Nico growled. "How in the fuck do you know?"

"Bianca told Grace, Grace told Luciano and guess what… the bastard told me and almost pissed himself laughing. He had a bet going among everyone whether Bianca would kill you first or Luca."

“Fucker,” Nico muttered. “Well, he lost.”

“There is still time,” Luca chimed in. “I might give her a tempting offer and we’ll do it together.”

Nico flipped his middle finger. Luca loved to taunt the man.

“Our sister took the news about birth control pills well, huh?” I returned to the topic.

Nico poured himself another drink. “Not exactly,” he said. “She threw a bit of glassware my way. And threatened to cut my balls off. Oh, and let’s not forget she locked me out of our bedroom too. It took me seven days of groveling for her to say two words to me.” I chuckled. I could see Bianca do it all. She had a temper. “And want to guess what they were?” he asked in a dry tone.

“Fuck off?” Luca guessed.

“You are enjoying this too much, fucker,” Nico snickered. “I’ll enjoy the show when it’s your turn.”

I glanced at Luca. My gut feeling was telling me it might be sooner rather than later.

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Chapter Nineteen

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ÁINE

I woke up with the jolt, my heart thundering hard in my chest. My eyes frantically drifted through the dark space, over unfamiliar furniture. The heavy silence stretched, making the darkness feel ominous. I swallowed hard, staring ahead with the stillness that carried on for a heartbeat or hundreds of those, I didn't know. My rapid breathing and pulse beating in my ears were the only sounds I could make out.

My skin felt clammy, the beat of my heart painful in my chest. The darkness slowly receded and realization set.

Hotel.

I was in a hotel in Russia. We completed a mission but the plane couldn't get us out until tomorrow. We rescued a group of young boys and got them out of a hellhole. Before we could get them on the plane that would take them to safety, the winds picked up and the flights were grounded. So we'd booked twenty hotel rooms in the middle of nowhere. We paid the receptionist a hefty amount to disappear for twenty minutes and got them all in. God, those boys! Most of them were skinny as a rail, ranging in ages from eight to seventeen. They were all in bad shape, beaten black and blue. It would seem innocents came in all shapes, sizes, and genders.

My heart slowed down to a reasonable pace by now, and I laid back down against the soft mattress. Usually when we rescued the victims, it was either me or Margaret staying with them. But then they were, more often than not, women we were saving. This time, the boys felt more comfortable with the men, so John and another one of our guys remained watching them. Tomorrow, we would get them out of here and place them in a safe house in the U.K.

It was April but the weather in this country was colder. Or maybe it wasn't in the normal parts of Russia. All I knew was that Siberia was fucking too cold for April. And those boys barely had any clothes on, their skin cracked, almost raw looking. William, one of our other men from The Rose Rescue, and I went to buy clothes, while John and Pilot, who also had medical training, remained to guard the kids and help them get cleaned up.

I pulled the covers over my body tighter, trying to preserve the heat, while I stared at the ceiling. There was a single spot on it darker than the rest of the ceiling, but it was too dark to distinguish what it was. And I was too exhausted to get up and turn the lights on.

Get some rest, my mind whispered.

I tried to shut my mind off, force myself to clear it of any thoughts and images. I've had too many nightmares lately and exhaustion has settled deep in my bones. If things kept going like this, I'd be no good to the team. And in a disturbing way, I needed this. This revenge against every man that scarred innocent women and men for life. The nightmares had me in the center of it all and though I didn't understand them, they pushed me forward. To make things right.

I wished Margaret was here. It usually took her a solid week to adjust to a time zone change. She'd be awake right now and I could ramble to her. She'd listen to my disjointed nonsense. She might even scoff and call me a martyr or crazy. That'd be okay - as long as I could talk. But she

wasn’t feeling well so she stayed behind. Wanting to check the time, I shifted my head to the right, the crinkly noise of the pillow fabric loud in the dark room. Too loud. Too dark. Too lonely.

It was 3:57 A.M.

My lungs tightened. It would be another long night. Another long day. God, I wished the dreams would just stop. Let me rest. Just one night.

Screams were so damn loud in the dreams, they’d wake up the dead. *I wonder if I’ll hear them when I die*, I thought darkly, because at this rate it wouldn't be long. Each time I dreamt, the pain swelled in my chest and my heart froze in cold fear. Maybe the latter piece would be gone when I finally go to that final resting place.

“Say one word.” The words were always the same. *“You can save them. Just say a word.”*

I never uttered a single word. I screamed in my head, begged in my head. But I never said it. *Why does it hurt to breathe?* I pressed my palm against my chest, rubbing the dull pain away. Those were some fucked up dreams. I should be dreaming about rainbows, ponies, designing the most magnificent building. Not this fucked up shit.

I turned to my side, the shuffling duvet making a rustling noise. My eyes glanced at the clock again.

Damn it. It was only 4:30 A.M.

I could work on my building drawings, but I’d be straining my eyes too much and I’d end up with a headache. I didn’t have a proper table nor lighting and my eyes already burned from exhaustion.

I reached out for my phone, sitting on the nightstand. It was afternoon back in New York, maybe Hunter messaged. We’ve texted a lot over the last few weeks. Each time I got a message from him, my stomach would do somersaults and my heart would flutter with excitement. Yes, it was stupid I got all giddy at the notion of a man’s message.

Sliding it open, an unread message waited for me. It was from Hunter and my heart skipped a beat.

I read it and my lips curved into a smile. ***What is my beautiful Butterfly doing?***

Eager for a distraction from my own thoughts, I quickly replied.

Waiting for your message. Fuck it, text messaging wasn't enough today. ***Are you in the mood for a phone call?***

One heartbeat and my phone rang. A smile spread on my face and I answered, suddenly feeling lighter. He was what I needed. "Áine, are you alright?"

Each time I thought about Hunter, there was a lightness in my chest. No matter what was happening; no matter how bad the nightmares got.

"Yes, I'm fine," I assured him. "I couldn't sleep and I'm tired as hell."

"Sleep?" That's right, he didn't know I was in another time zone, a different country. There were many times in the last few weeks when I really wanted to tell him what I did. I never felt the need to tell Jack, nor my mother. Yet, I wanted to tell Hunter, make him understand. But I had just met him, and I couldn't risk The Rose Rescue on my need to tell him.

"Yeah, I'm overseas," I explained, keeping it vague. "Time difference is killing me. What are you doing?"

"Besides talking to you?" he chuckled. "Going through some boring paperwork."

"Work stuff?"

"Yes." He never told me what his profession was. Somehow, he didn't strike me as a nine to five businessman.

"What is it that you do?" I asked him.

"Run a business." Hmm, the answer seemed vague just as my answer on where I was.

"What kind of business?"

“I own several nightclubs, casinos, and hotels.” There was a tone to his voice that led me to believe there were other things he ran as well, but when he left it at that, I let it go. I didn’t want to pry too much. After all, I had my own things that were not for discussion. “Do you often have issues sleeping?”

His perception surprised me. We’ve spent little time together in Vegas, but other than that, we haven’t had a chance to see each other again. We texted a lot over the weeks, but I didn’t think he’d pick up on my sleep issues over the text messages.

“Sometimes nightmares plague me,” I admitted uncomfortably. “I know, I know,” I added in an exasperated tone, trying to lighten it with joking. “I’m too old for those.”

“Nobody is too old for nightmares. Have you talked to someone about it?”

“Yeah, I see someone occasionally.” I wasn’t ready to admit to him that I went through a treatment every so often to ease the migraines and nightmares.

“Does it help?” He sounded sincerely concerned and somehow it felt good to talk about it.

“It did, in the beginning. Now, I just don’t know.” I shifted on the bed, trying to get comfortable. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Try it,” he urged. “Even if it doesn’t make sense.”

I exhaled deeply. Truthfully, none of it made sense. “I keep having dreams of something that never happened,” I murmured into the phone. “The images are bad… disturbing. And I’m in the middle of it.”

Two heartbeats of silence seemed like two hours. “What are the images about?’

Sick, twisted images, I wanted to say. “Women being tortured,” I answered instead vaguely, my voice slightly strained. “And though I want to say something, help… I never do.” And their screams pierce my brain and bleed my ears. But there was no need to go that deep into it.

“Do you think it’s a memory?” he asked softly. God, was this man for real? I fully expected uncomfortable silence and changing subjects.

A choked laugh escaped me. “I think I’d remember it when I’m awake if it was,” I told him. Though in my dreams it felt like a memory. “Sometimes-”

My voice trailed off, unsure about my next words. “Tell me,” he said, his voice a soft demand.

“Sometimes, the images come to me when I’m awake,” I muttered. “They slam into my brain out of nowhere. No idea what triggers it.” God, this was stupid but I couldn’t stop. “Ummm, like your hand.”

“My hand?”

“Your hand tattoo,” I murmured. I loved the ink of his skin and his rose tattoo was my favorite. But somehow it connected to my images. “There is one image that never leaves me. It is a hand reaching out. I can’t make out anything else about that hand, except for the rose tattoo.”

Ba bum. Ba bum. Ba bum.

A strangled laugh escaped me. “Weird, huh? I swear, I’m not crazy.” I tried to lighten the conversation. “Anyhow, tell me how is your week so far?”

“First, you are not crazy.” His voice was strong and sure, convincing. “Trust me on this one.” When I didn’t make a sound, he continued, “Áine, do you trust me?”

The question surprised me; my answer surprised me even more.

“Yes.” No idea how I knew that, but deep down I did.

“Then trust me when I say, you are not crazy. We all deal with our issues differently,” he started to explain. “Your way is through the dreams.”

God, he almost made it sound like I had lived those images. Yet, I didn’t remember them ever happening in my life.

“Do you have issues?” I asked him, trying hard to move away from me.

“We all have issues, Butterfly,” he answered, sincerity in his voice. “So yes, I have some too.” I wanted to ask him what they were, and help him through talking. Kind of like he was helping me right now. But before I could open my mouth, he continued, “My father, who wasn’t much of one, wasn’t a good man. He destroyed a lot of families.” A soft gasp slipped through my lips. It never dawned on me to look up Hunter’s family. Shit, I didn’t even know his last name. Who was his father? “He even hurt the families of some of my best friends. I know it wasn’t me that did it. Yet, I can’t shake off the responsibility or guilt associated with it.”

His admission surprised me. Though somehow the fact that he took responsibility for his father’s sins didn’t surprise me. I had absolutely nothing to base it on, except that Hunter somehow struck me as the type that took his family's responsibilities seriously. Kind of like Jack, my stepfather. If anyone in his extended family did something stupid or wrong, Jack felt it as a direct reflection of himself and his own failure.

“You are not your father,” I comforted him. “I’m sorry he hurt your friends’ families. You can’t choose family, but you can choose your friends. Friends are more often a reflection of us than our families. We picked *them*, while family blood ties were forced upon us. Hope that makes sense.”

“It does,” he answered, his deep voice strong. This might have been too heavy of a topic. So far, our texting has been mostly casual. Yet, it felt so right to talk to him. “Now, tell me how can we get you to get some rest?”

I chuckled. “I’m wide awake now,” I retorted. “I don’t think there will be any more sleeping. Maybe phone sex?” I asked hopefully.

His booming laugh came through the line and I swore my insides melted. I loved hearing his laugh.

“Too forward?” I asked, grinning like a fool.

“Never,” he assured me right away. “I love your forwardness.” Oh my goodness. Something deep down in my chest beamed like the brightest light at his words. “Now tell me what you’re wearing, Vita Mia?”

I fucking loved his endearment names for me. *Butterfly* was cute. *Vita Mia* just turned me into mush.

“Not much,” I answered in a sultry tone, hoping my seduction voice was somewhat decent. “Just panties.”

A soft groan came over the line. “No top?’

I quickly shuffled my phone between my hands and discarded my top. “Not anymore,” I answered, my voice slightly breathless. I couldn’t believe we were doing this but my heart thundered in anticipation like I was a teenager doing something naughty for the first time.

Like French kissing, I thought grinning.

“Touch your breasts,” he ordered. I immediately brought my hand to my breasts, tracing my fingers over the nipple. “Are you touching yourself?”

“Yes,” I rasped.

“Pinch your nipple,” he ordered. The same moment I followed through, a moan slipped through my lips and my back arched off the mattress.

“Hunter,” I breathed out. My body was on fire. “Are- are you touching yourself?”

“You want me to?” Did I ever?

“Yes,” I panted, my hand snaking down my stomach.

The zipper noise came through the phone, followed by a grunt and the sound just about sent me over the edge. This was what happened when you remained a virgin until you were twenty-five.

“Fuck,” he grunted. “I’m fisting my cock imagining it’s you, but there is nothing better than your tight pussy.” I’d combust any moment. My pants were getting louder, my breathing heavy and matching Hunter’s. “Are you touching your pussy?”

My hand slipped into my panties. “Yes,” I moaned.

“Rub your clit,” he urged, his voice rough. I followed his instructions, rubbing the wetness over my nub faster and faster. My pulse raced, my heart drummed against my ribs, the coiled pleasure like a hot lava in my stomach.

“Oh, Hunter,” I panted. “I’m so wet. I ache for you.”

“That’s right, Vita Mia,” he murmured, the sound of his own pumping coming over the phone. It was fucking hot. “Tell me how it feels.”

“Oh, God,” I moaned, my heart thundering. My mouth parted, my breathing erratic. “So good. Your hard cock is in my pussy. Stretching me. It feels so good.” I licked my lips, remembering how his cum felt on my lips. “I want to taste your cum on my tongue.”

A guttural sound echoed through the phone, the rhythmic sound in sync with my own fingers thrusting in and out of my pussy.

“You feel me,” he breathed hard. “I’m pushing my fingers into your wet pussy. Stretching you.”

“Ahhh, yes.” I was losing my mind, my fingers thrusting in and out. In and out. “Please. Oh fuck!”

His groans were only turning me on more. Heat shot straight to my core, a blazing pleasure spreading through my body.

“Hunter, please,” I begged. “I want your cock inside me.”

“Fuck, Vita Mia. I want that too.” My grunting matched his, my moans pitched higher and higher. I thrashed against the sheet, every inch of my body hypersensitive. I was right at the edge of a cliff, ready to jump off and lose myself into white-hot pleasure.

“Hunter, I’m coming,” I moaned, my core throbbing. God, my fingers would never be enough now that I had his cock inside me. “Hunter, please. Oh, God. Yes, yes. Yes.”

“Fuck, yes,” his grunt echoed through the phone, rough and loud. “Come for me, Vita Mia.”

My body exploded, a million stars shot behind my eyelids as languid heat spread to my toes, and my head buzzed with intense pleasure. My body shuddered as an orgasm rolled through me like waves over the ocean while I chanted Hunter's name. Over and over again.

Through the lust infused fog, I heard my name on Hunter's lips and it made the pleasure even better.

As my breathing slowed, the room came back into focus along with the man on the other end of the line.

"Fuck, Butterfly," he murmured. "I wish I could have seen your face as you finished."

My cheeks heated. "FaceTime sex next time," I murmured softly, feeling sated.

His soft chuckle had me melting. "Definitely," he agreed. "I haven't done phone sex nor FaceTime sex before, but I could get used to this."

It was my turn to chuckle. "I haven't either," I admitted. "But I like it. Although not as much as the real thing."

"Soon," he promised.

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Chapter Twenty

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CASSIO

Poker night.

It was usually entertaining, but today, I found it to be slightly agitating. It had been a whole week since Nico gave me an information dump on Áine and The Rose Rescue. After speaking with her three nights ago, I knew it to be true. She must have been on one of her missions, somewhere in fucking Russia. I knew where she was thanks to Nico.

The possibility of Áine running a search and rescue type of mission in all corners of the world didn't sit well with me. The irrational fear that something could happen to her at any moment was sending an icy rush of panic through my veins.

Of course, it did nothing to help me win the poker game.

I sat around the table with Nico, Alessio, Luca, Luciano, Sasha, and Alexei. It was our regular monthly boys' poker night. Sasha was a recent addition to our card table, but nonetheless fierce and loyal. Though reckless as fuck. It was these men around this table who I trusted with my life. Luca was my brother by blood and the others were by choice. My loyalty to my friends wasn't any less than to my brother. I knew the same to be true for them.

Most of us went years back. Luciano to my childhood. Nico and Alessio to college years. Alexei right after. Raphael right around that time. We all just clicked. Whether we shared similar tragedies or the same cause, we stood by each other.

Less than a decade ago, Nico, Luciano, Luca, and I found ourselves in Moscow. To get one of our own out of that fucking country- Alexei Nikolaev. Of course, back then he was just Alexei. The scars that man endured still fucking gutted me. Whether it was the fact that it happened shortly after Luca and I saved the young girl with shattered blue eyes or whether we reached a tipping point, I didn't know. But that night, as we drank cheap liquor, revealed scars we all carried, and wished for a better life, we formed a pact.

We would end this fucking suffering. We'd fight together. Always.

"I hear you might be dating?" Alessio teased. "Text dating or some shit like that. I never knew that was a thing."

Luca had a big goddamn mouth. Texting with Áine was not dating, though I'd lie if I said I didn't enjoy our little conversations. But I itched to have my ring on her finger.

"My dating life is none of your business." My answer was curt, but fuck… what do you say? I have worked on my trap for almost two years so better not fuck it up? And my soon-to-be wife, I hope, has so many damn secrets, I wasn't sure if I was coming or going. Though after our phone conversation, I really hoped I was coming.

That woman had snuck into my heart, and when it came to her, my rational mind went out the window.

Luca snickered and I glared at him.

Nico laughed, but he remained quiet since he knew most of the information on Áine. Fuck, I was sure if he wanted to, he could somehow dig up all my texts with her. Good thing he was on my side and my sister kept him busy.

“I sense a story,” Luciano taunted. Ever since he and Grace got back together, he was way too fucking happy.

“Oh, there is one,” Luca smirked.

“Shut the fuck up, brother.”

Now, everyone's eyes looked up from their cards and interest was no longer on the game.

“Now, now,” Sasha grinned. “I kind of feel left out. Tell us more about Áine Evans. Won’t you bring us up to speed, Cassio?”

“No,” I growled in response. “She is not up for discussion.”

Everyone knew what that meant.

“But she’s good to you, right?” Luciano questioned.

“Yes.” God, was she good! That was an understatement. She made me dream, fly high. Fuck, just thinking about Áine made me hard. Usually women ride high when they meet someone. In my case, it was me. I have been riding high from that first night in Temptation.

The image of Áine on her back, thrashing underneath me while moaning in pleasure flashed in my mind. Even the phone sex. Yeah, not a good thing to think about right now.

My cell rang and I glanced at it.

Instantly, I tensed and picked up the line. “Amir.”

Amir was the protection guy to my soon-to-be wife. The boy that led us to her cell and helped us get out of that cluster when we rescued Áine. Who better to protect her than the boy that blended into shadows? He had been part of Luca and my team for years now.

Of course, Áine didn’t know I had someone assigned to her already. Except, the woman was good at slipping in and out of shadows herself. Amir never lost a trail on anyone. Except Áine.

“She is leaving the country.”

“What? Again?” I growled. “She just got back!” Every single one of the looks of my friends and my brother was on

me. There was only one *she*. And it wasn't like Amir could control her travel itinerary.

I paused for a second and barked at Nico. "Can you track Áine's phone?"

He was already on it. Nico was starting to learn that the only thing that got me riled up lately was Áine's safety.

"She's going to Turkey," Nico announced. A bad feeling hit me right in the chest. Eleven years ago, I found her in Turkey beaten and bruised.

"Can you get to her before she gets on the plane?" I asked Amir. The image of her amidst danger, in a war zone, or even worse, among men like Marco kept playing in my mind.

"Only if I kidnap her," he spat dryly. "She's at LaGuardia, private gate."

"Grab her and take her to Callahan or to her apartment," I retorted dryly. Both of us knew it wouldn't be easy, but fuck if I would let her endanger herself. Fucking Turkey! Marco's smuggling operation always seemed to go back to Turkey. "Lock her up if you have to. Don't let her leave until I get back."

Alessio's one eyebrow shot up while Nico tried hard not to smile. He better not; otherwise, I wouldn't be responsible for what followed. Like a punch in the face.

"And what do you want me to do with the men?"

"What fucking men?" Blind red-hot jealousy shot through me.

"There are five men in the group that she is traveling with. I'm not sure if I can take them all down alone." Shit, she had a crew of men. That woman rattled me so much that I was acting like a prick with no brain.

"I don't care how you do it! Don't let her get on the plane," I barked, worry clawing at my chest.

I hung up and dialed Áine. Each ring cost me years of my life. She just got back into the U.S. When did the woman

have time to work on her drawings and run rescue missions? *Probably all the lack of sleep*, I thought wryly.

No answer. Redial.

“Cassio calm the fuck down.” Luca tried to reason with me, but the irrational worry was already igniting and burning like an inferno.

“Why isn’t she fucking answering?” I bellowed. I scanned through my messages and the moment I saw the email from my fucking half-brother Marco I knew the exact coordinates of where she was going. Marco didn’t know we hacked his emails and got blind copies of all his shit. Courtesy of my brother-in-law, Nico Morrelli.

I stood up, the chair falling backwards onto the floor with a loud thump. “Border of Armenia,” I gritted. It wasn’t the same exact place where I found her beaten eleven years ago, but it was fifty miles north of it. “That’s where she is going.”

Luciano just grinned. “Now you know what the fuck I went through.”

I dialed her again, while sharing a glance with Luca and Nico.

After my jerky nod, Luca started explaining in a calm tone. “It would seem my soon-to-be sister-in-law, who is unaware of her impending engagement, has a team of her own and has been intercepting trafficking shipments that Marco and his associates are running.”

Sasha’s mouth was almost on the ground and Alexei whistled impressively.

“Well, I got to say, Cassio,” Luciano chuckled. “That trumps my wife’s money laundering.”

“I thought Áine Evans was an architect,” Alessio questioned. Of course, my brother probably gave them her damn history.

“Among other things,” Luca answered, chuckling, though I found nothing amusing.

“Why isn’t she fucking answering?” I gritted. “Yes, she’s an architect. Apparently, she has a side gig going on.”

I wished she’d trust me enough and tell me what the hell she was doing before she got herself killed.

“That’s some gig.” Alessio got his composure back and downed his scotch.

Luciano on the other hand didn’t seem too concerned. Not too long ago he bellowed like a madman after his wife. He had experienced headaches with a strong willed wife firsthand, so I guess he understood and took a bit more to ruffle his feathers.

“It’s as if she’s aiming to get herself killed.” And I had no intention of being a widower even before I got married. My phone buzzed.

Message from Amir. ***Couldn’t get her.***

Goddamn it! I dialed up my pilot and had him ready the plane for takeoff within the next sixty minutes.

“I’m coming too.” I knew nothing would stop Luca. He was as stubborn as I was.

“I’m coming too.” Alessio chimed in.

“Fuck it,” Luciano muttered. “I guess I am coming too.”

“Sign me the fuck up,” Nico added.

“No, you guys stay and cover the territory.” I turned to Luciano. “Your wife needs you.” My eyes traveled to Nico, and he was already opening his mouth to object, knowing where I was going. He wanted to come along. “Nico, my dear sister would kill me. So that would be a hard no. She’d kick my ass and send me to hell. Then drag me back, just so she could kick my ass again.”

“Just to see Bianca do that, I want to come even more,” Nico retorted dryly.

“Besides, Callahan can cover the territory,” Luciano retorted dryly. Nobody told Luciano what to do. “Or the Russian Sinners,” he offered up.

“I prefer you guys,” I told him. “We are close to ending human trafficking on the East Coast. I need you all to stay

and cover our business here. I will handle Áine Evans.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

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ÁINE

Tears streamed down my face uncontrollably. I was so fucking scared. How did I get here? I was a frightened, snot-nosed, red-eyed spoiled teenager who found myself in a nightmare, and I feared it would be my end.

I watched with wide eyes as they tortured the poor woman, my entire body shivering with cold and fear. My teeth actually chattered, the loud noise of it mixing with the painful cries of the young woman. Her face was so swollen and her skin had a blue tint to it.

"This is waterboarding," the guy that gripped her hair explained. He wasn't old or dirty like some of the other men. But his eyes… they were worse. The scariest thing I had ever seen. A menace and maniacal expression lingered in them as he watched me.

I wrapped my arms around me, my teeth making an unnatural sound as they clattered against each other. A combination of cold and terror. The mixing of my chattering teeth and the whimpers from the woman made for an eerie loud sound as they echoed through the bare room. I could hear more cries in the distance but they seemed so far away. As if we were in a separate nightmare, different twilight zone.

There were no windows in this room. Just dirty walls, three men, and three women. Three girls actually. I was fourteen and the other girls couldn’t be older than eighteen. But it was hard to tell from the terrified expressions, the blood all over their bodies, and their beaten faces.

The one he was torturing now… Her right eye was swollen shut, her lip split, and I… I remained quiet for fear he’d do the same thing to me.

I deserved to die; the thought played on repeat in my mind. I was no better, because I didn’t utter a single word to save her. I was a snot-nosed teenager that only worried about self-preservation. All I could do was cry and cry, shiver with fear I had never felt before.

We would die here. I was certain.

“Still not a single word?” His taunting voice startled me, and I peeled my gaze from the poor girl. “One word and we’ll stop this. Any word. Or it could just be a simple ‘stop’.”

Except, if I’d say it, he said he’d touch me. Make me scream, he said. He said I’d like it but I was certain I wouldn’t.

The hard, rough dirt floors and rugged rocky walls of our prison were all I'd seen. I shifted uncomfortably as a rock on the dirt packed floor dug into my knee.

I wasn't even sure how long I'd been here… days, weeks. Months maybe. Definitely not long enough to be a year, but then again, I guess I couldn't be sure. Time blurred together here. The musty smell of the wooden cell doors, mixed with the overwhelming scents of body odor and other bodily fluids. I still wore the school uniform I had on when they took me. When they kidnapped me.

My eyes found those of the terrified girl next to me. Her face was bloodied too; her body discolored because of the bruises, cuts, and other wounds. My eyes flashed back to the other woman, spitting and sputtering water from her

mouth. I deserved to die*... I'd watched them torture both of the women, yet, I didn't utter a single word to save them... to help them. All I could do was cry and tremble with a fear I'd never felt before.*

I didn't stand a chance against anyone, never mind this cruel and twisted man. He was enjoying this. Even without the bulge in his pants, I could see it all over his face. Bile rose in my throat, and with each second, it threatened to empty my stomach contents.

My eyes returned to the poor girl. Her eyes were blue, though right now it was hard to tell.

"Do you know who I am?" he shouted and my eyes snapped back to him. Why was he doing this?

My brain was in a fog. He asked the question as if I ***should*** *know who he was. But I didn't; I was certain I had never seen him before. I shook my head, gritting my teeth, desperate to end my teeth from chattering against each other. I stood up, hoping some resemblance of my strength would appear.*

"You will," he snarled. "You'll never forget it." He shoved the other girl onto the dirty ground and stalked over to me. With each step he took closer to me, the bile in my throat rushed further and further up.

It was a bitter acid on my tongue, and it burned as I swallowed it down. I couldn't let it come up my throat. I had to show at least some strength. I watched in slow motion as he balled his hand into a fist and swung through the air, hitting my jaw. My head flew backwards and I stumbled. My skull hit the wall so hard spots danced in my vision, different shades of black, red, and white.

I barely blinked my eyes before his other hand wrapped around my throat and lifted me up into the air. My hands wrapped around his hand, my fingernails clawing into his wrists.

"Say the word," he taunted. But I refused. If I said it, he'd rape me. He said so, and God help me, I still hoped for

a rescue. My father was the prime minister. Someone was coming for me. For us. Right?

Desperate for air, I kicked at him, gasping. Just a tiny breath.

"I'm Marco King, you bitch," he spat out. "You'll never forget my name."

He threw me through the air, and I flew further down into the dark abyss, nothing there to stop my fall…

"Áine wake the fuck up!" The voice came from a distance, breaking my fall. Another shake of my body and I peeled my eyes open. I was exhausted and nausea lingered in my system. Goddamn it! I should have seen Dr. Taylor before I left for this assignment. My dreams were getting worse.

"Stop shaking me, John," I muttered in a raspy voice. I didn't need to puke right now, I was already somewhere in the dark pit of the fucking nightmare that I didn't understand. I had never met Marco King, yet I knew his face. I knew his voice. I even knew his scent.

Benito King killed my father. I would kill his legacy. His offspring. The only reason I could conjure that I knew so much about Marco King was that I researched him so thoroughly. I knew of Cassio and Luca King but finding something on them was next to impossible. I only knew their names. But Marco… I knew a lot more, and if I was honest with myself, I'd enjoy killing that man. The psychotic part of me even anticipated it with delight. I would enjoy torturing him.

"You alright?" John's eyes bore into me, studying me. He was in his forties, worked with my dad, and I trusted him. When Dad died, I was grateful he stayed along to guide me through it. I wouldn't have made it without him. Though he worried too much about me.

"Just peachy," I muttered, rubbing my temples. My headaches were getting worse by the day. I hated seeing Dr. Taylor. Each time I had my session, I came out of it

feeling physically better but mentally, it felt like the black hole in my brain just became bigger. Talk about a fucked up mental state.

I wonder if Hunter will run when he figures out all my baggage, I thought wryly to myself. I hoped he wouldn't, but I couldn't say that I would blame him if he did.

"Landing in five minutes." The captain's voice echoed through the cabin. Damn it, I felt exhausted. The last month has been non-stop hunting, along with some large projects going on at my day job. I was thrilled when the newest assignment to build a housing shelter for victims of human trafficking was assigned to me. Though if I was being honest with myself, I was juggling too many things.

"You know, you could sit this one out," John suggested, buckling his seatbelt for landing. This might be a private plane but John was as straight-laced as they came. Had to be his military upbringing.

"No, thank you," I told him, grabbing my phone. I turned it back on to check for any messages. Margaret was sick, throwing your guts up kind of sick, so she couldn't join us. Again, it left me all alone with the men - John, Edward, William, Harry, and Pilot. He refused to give his name so we all just called him Pilot.

I liked it better when Margaret was with me. It made the men split the fuss. When it was just me, they acted like my human shields. I mean, I appreciated it and all, but they just went overboard.

No message from Margaret. *Odd,* I thought silently. She must be seriously sick. I shot her a quick message telling her we missed her and wished her a fast recovery, then scrolled down. My lips curved into a smile.

Hunter!

After your business trip to Turkey, I'm taking you to my favorite restaurant. We'll set some ground rules.

It has been weeks since I've seen him. I missed him, his touch, his smile, his scent. *Everything*. It was the craziest feeling, and I loved it because it made me feel somewhat normal. For the first time in my adult life, I felt like I had some kind of relationship.

***I'm counting on it."** I typed back, then pressed the send button.

Just as I turned off the phone and shoved it into my bag, it dawned on me.

I *neve*r told him I was going to Turkey.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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CASSIO

In a crouched position, Luca next to me, I watched the woman I was going to marry in less than a week run towards the young girl while bullets showered the entire area. The men on her team shouted at her, screaming for her to get back, but she paid them no attention. Her entire focus was on the girl that fell to the ground as men came after her while others shot at her team.

I stood up, ready to run and kill all the men that were shooting in Áine's direction. Luca almost tackled me down and the rage in my veins burned.

"We'll blow our cover," he hissed the warning. I didn't care about our cover right now. I didn't save Áine eleven years ago to watch her die today. I shoved him away, my eyes immediately searching for the familiar form. If we started running towards her now, we'd make her an even bigger target.

When my local guys lost Áine, I was furious. But I knew Marco was smuggling another shipment of women through Turkey, and I suspected I might find her here. I almost hoped she wasn't.

Of course, Marco was too good to leave his safety net and handle the dirty work himself. Instead, he was hiding

and handling business through video transactions, examining women like cattle virtually.

“Aim and shoot each one of the gunmen,” I ordered Luca. “Do not miss,” I hissed. Luca had a good aim, however the scales changed when it came to the safety of *my* woman. “Once they are at a safe distance, we’ll blow up the place.”

Luca and I were here for the same reason as Áine. It would seem we had a common cause, and I knew our marriage would be good. She’d be my strength and I’d be hers. She was a worthy fighter and my chest swelled with pride.

“Two on her right,” I muttered to my brother. I shot the ones on the left that dared to raise their weapon at my woman. Nobody was allowed to touch or hurt the ones I loved. And this woman… she was mine, under my protection. She had been from the moment I saved her from that hellhole eleven years ago.

Áine ran from the compound that was used as the transfer point to get women to their final destination. She kept a young girl next to her, holding her hand to ensure she wouldn't fall behind. They both wore bullet proof vests, but that wouldn’t save them if they were shot in the head.

I steadied my arm, aimed, and shot. *Another man down.* Luca did the same.

The fear hit me as I watched men get closer and closer to Áine. She raised her hand, pointed her gun and shot. Damn, she was a good shot, handled the gun better than most men I’d seen. They both stopped suddenly. Áine’s hands wrapped around the girl who looked terrified, burying her head in Áine’s chest. The latter kept her cool. Good thing. Because in moments like this, losing her cool could cost her life.

I kept shooting at men that surrounded the walls of the compound. Luca and I were on higher ground. If we were down there, among Áine and her men, we’d be sitting

ducks. Up here, we had a clear shot, and none of the men saw it coming.

We took them down, one by one. A bullet straight into their chest. Unfortunately for them, they didn't wear bulletproof vests.

"We have to leave," one of the men shouted. He was part of Áine's team. "Get the girl and let's go."

I saw horror cross Áine's expression, her eyes locked to the left side of the compound. I followed her gaze, and the same second iced terror seeped through my heart.

"Machine gun. Ten o'clock," I spat. It was too late though. The bullets started flying all over the sand, hitting all around Áine and the little girl. She sheltered the girl with her body, bullets inching their way closer and closer to them. Áine's hair reflected all shades of a burning sun against the rays of the sun high up in the sky. There was no way for her to blend into the desert tan landscape.

Despite the terror in my heart, the calm washed over me as I zeroed in on the threat. I steadied my hand, aimed, and pulled the trigger. I held my breath as it flew through the air and it hit the target. He fell onto his knees, his aim uncontrolled.

A terrified scream and I watched with horror as Áine fell to her knees. My lungs no longer worked, my breath stuck in my throat.

"Áine," the screams echoed through the desert, but they weren't mine. Mine screamed in my head as I watched her men run towards her. I shoved to my feet but my brother's arms held me back from behind me.

"We can't blow our cover," he hissed. I didn't give a shit about the cover anymore. The woman I loved… that I fucking ***loved*** laid in someone else's arms. The young girl that Áine saved held her up, tears streaming down her face, but all of it was drowned out by my own thundering heart, sorrow and rage.

I shoved him.

“Wait, Cassio,” Luca gritted, struggling to keep me back. “Our position is better up here. There are more men coming. Keep shooting or they’ll all be dead.”

I knew he was right, but the pull was tearing me up on the inside.

The man she called John earlier pulled out the knife and my heart stopped beating. He cut into her. I bellowed in rage, ready to kill. Kill them all. There were few of her crew that kept watch around them. They heard me, their eyes darting around, but they couldn’t see us.

“I will kill them all,” I raged.

“Hunter, look.” My brother’s voice barely registered. He used my middle name, which he rarely did. “Look.”

I stared, but all I saw was Áine’s pale face, her eyes closed. And then her eyes snapped open, her breathing heavy and her hands clawing at her chest.

“She’s fine.” Luca’s voice got to my brain. “Look. The bullet hit her vest. She’s fine.”

I watched her discard her vest and gasp for air. And with each breath she took in, life was breathed back into my lungs. Relief that washed over me was stronger than a hurricane over oceans. The thundering in my ears slowly receded. The enemy was still a threat, one of them pointing a gun at the little group.

Aiming my sniper rifle, I shot him. One silent bullet. There was another on top of the building. Aim. Shoot. Dead.

“What the fuck, Evans?” The man’s angry voice drifted over the breeze as he yelled at my woman. The fact that we could hear them from our distance told me he was bellowing at her. “You could have gotten killed.”

That fucking asshole better stop yelling at my woman. From here, I could see her take a breath in, rubbing her chest. I knew firsthand it hurt like a motherfucker to get shot, even through the vest. Áine’s head turned to him. Even from here, I could see her glares and anger.

“Don’t ever try to take off leaving someone behind, you ass,” she shouted back. He offered her his hand but she slapped it away and stood up on her own. “Next time you try to leave too soon, Harry, I’ll kill you myself.”

“Who in the fuck is this woman?” Luca murmured under his breath. It would seem Nico’s intelligence was spot on. This was our confirmation that Áine was running missions, saving trafficked women. Though in my gut I knew Nico’s information was right the moment he uttered those words.

My eyes scanned her frame, ensuring she didn’t have any injuries. She reached her hand to the little girl and smiled. Her mouth spoke something softly to the girl, her soft smile never leaving her lips. The girl didn’t move, her face stained with tears and fear. My heart clenched at the memory from ten years ago, a similar scene with a red-haired girl.

It was the next move that made me wonder if subconsciously Áine maybe didn’t remember what happened to her all those years ago.

She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a lollipop, handing it to the young girl. It was what I had offered Áine all those years ago. Áine helped her unwrap the lollipop and smiled encouragingly.

“Can’t those fuckers just disappear?” Luca muttered and I followed his gaze.

More of Marco’s men.

“Start eliminating them from the right,” I told Luca. Shouting in Russian could be heard from the oncoming group.

“They are Russians,” Luca grumbled next to me.

It would seem Marco had indeed teamed up with Ivan Petrov. Son of a bitch! Luca shot the first bullet their way, diverting their attention away from the group at the bottom and back on us. Immediately, they started shooting at us. Both of us ducked down and lay flat on our stomach.

Gunfire echoed all throughout, but unlike when I thought Áine died, my heartrate never even sped up. One by one, we eliminated the Russians. For all their numbers, they were like a flock of chicks. Disorganized and barely a threat. Unless you were out in the open like Áine and her group. This would give them a chance to get out of there.

The sound of the helicopter was loud as it took off, taking my woman to safety was the best comfort I could have been given at that moment. The second they were out of everyone's range, Luca and I went to work full force.

Blowing the motherfucking place into dust.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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ÁINE

I reread Hunter’s message again. ***After your business trip to Turkey, I’m taking you to my favorite restaurant. We’ll set some ground rules.***

I have been back for two days and haven't had a text. I sent him a note the moment I landed. I never claimed to be a patient person. But Hunter still hadn’t replied. It was slightly uncharacteristic of him. After weeks of texting back and forth, I came to pick up on some things.

Hunter was incredibly patient. Unlike me. He had an eerily innate way of picking up my moods. Even over texts. When I asked him how he always knew, he said my texts were my tell. Usually the shorter the text, the worse my mood.

So, he’d have flowers delivered. Or a basket of chocolates. Or my favorite, Irish apple cake. Hunter found a way to send deliveries to me, no matter where I was. Croatia, UK, Spain, or New York.

When I told him about my favorite dessert, he laughed. His favorite was cannoli. He blamed it on his Italian grandfather. I blamed it on my Irish stepfather.

All through the weeks we talked, he’d never, ***ever***, not responded. And now… It seemed uncharacteristic of him not to respond. I had a bad feeling about it. Besides, what

in the hell did he mean by setting up some ground rules? And how did he know I was going to Turkey? First, I thought it was something kinky but that didn't explain his comment about my location. Either way, I was at a loss.

"Hello, Miss Áine." Jack's guard, Connor, greeted me as I walked through the entrance.

"Hello, Connor," I greeted him back. "Get rid of that Miss. We agreed that you would just call me by my first name."

"Ah, nay." He shook his head. "You agreed. I just kept quiet."

I rolled my eyes, though I couldn't stop the grin from spreading across my face. He got me there.

"Mom and Jack home?" I asked, rather than admit defeat.

It was one thing Hunter and I had in common. Neither one of us ever admitted defeat. Not sure if it was a good quality, or not, to share.

Remains to be seen, I thought wryly.

Connor nodded and I continued on through the vast foyer. Usually, Jack was in the study at this time of day. I wasn't in the mood to hang around here tonight, but I came to offer Margaret my support. She would have done the same for me. It was the night the engagement would be announced. But only to the family and friends. Obviously, I was curious to meet her mystery soon-to-be husband. So was she. It wasn't every day that you got engaged to someone you never met or knew his name.

I hated to admit it, but I was fucking glad not to be in her shoes. I'd spit fire if I was cornered into marrying someone. Might even employ some of the torturing techniques I learned about but rarely got to exercise - sleep deprivation, diet manipulation, sensory deprivation, false friendship.

Margaret's sobs stopped my thoughts dead in their tracks. The sounds traveled through my stepfather's office

door and my steps faltered. Callahan could be intimidating, but he would never upset a woman. I stilled, alarms going off all throughout my body. In all my years that I've known Margaret, she never cried. Not even a hint of a tear.

So why is she crying now?

This arrangement wasn't of her choosing, but she seemed resigned to accept it. She said it wasn't uncommon to see it happen in families like hers. She had known about her engagement for the past three months although she didn't know to whom exactly. All she knew was that it was a business partner, and it would allow for a strong alliance.

It had been over a month since we partied in Las Vegas. While I've thrown myself into work and the new project that started, among other things, she reluctantly started the wedding preparations. The whole ordeal was weird to me, but the whole Callahan business wasn't exactly what I was accustomed to. Jack Callahan made my mother happy and made her feel safe. That was all that mattered to me.

Another sob and I had enough. Whoever it was, I wouldn't let them upset her. I swung the door to Jack's office open.

"Jack?" I called out to my stepfather and took the situation in. Jack was pacing back and forth while Margaret sat in the chair, her eyes red from tears. "Margaret, are you okay?"

She gave me a jerky nod, but she wasn't okay.

My eyes traveled to the guests. Shock and recognition sank in. My heart sprinted in my chest but then bewilderment followed.

"Hunter?" I called out in confusion. *What is going on here?*

Hunter titled his head, but there was no emotion on his face. It was like watching a stoic mask. So unlike the man I met in Las Vegas and the club two years ago. Unlike the man I have been texting with for the past six weeks. My

forehead scrunched as I took them all in. Both wore a formal, three piece suit.

Is he-? No, it couldn't be.

"Áine, I didn't realize you were here." Jack walked over to me and took my hands in his.

"Mom said you guys wanted me over earlier." My eyes darted to the mantel where I knew he kept a clock and then as if Hunter was my magnet, my eyes flicked his way again. "Am I too early?"

It was almost six in the evening.

"No, no." He tried to force a smile onto his face. He was trying not to alarm me but something was definitely wrong.

"Say no one more time," I joked, though it felt forced to my own ears, "and I will know for sure everything is wrong." My eyes darted past his shoulder to Margaret. "What's going on?"

Flickering a gaze back to Hunter, I had a bad feeling about this. A really, really bad feeling. A tight knot formed in my stomach but my mind kept ignoring it.

"Áine, go find your mom," Jack replied with a fake nonchalant. He was trying hard to maintain his control. "It's just business here."

"Then why is Margaret crying?" I said, locking my eyes with him. *This is bad*, something whispered in my ear. *So, so bad.*

"Please, kiddo." Dread pooled in my stomach. Something was definitely wrong. Jack only called me kiddo when he was worried about me.

"Okay," I said and saw relief wash over his face. "Margaret can come with me though. It's clear you guys are upsetting her." And I had to get the scoop on what the fuck was going on here. And why was Hunter here talking to Jack?

Jack closed his eyes but not for long. Just long enough for him to take a deep breath in and exhale. I couldn't help but compare him using breathing techniques to rein in

control the same way I used it to rein in my fear. Jack had a bad temper. So did I. Thankfully, my mother was the reason in this family.

“It’s just some business stuff I’m handling,” Jack grunted. “Now off you go.”

I cocked my eyebrow. He must be out of his mind if he thought I’d scatter now.

“Well, your business stuff is upsetting her. She can come with me and you guys can figure out your *business stuff.* Or you can tell me what the fuck is going on.”

I could feel Hunter’s eyes on me, lingering, burning me. As if he was commanding my eyes to be on him. It has been over six weeks since I’d last seen him. Through our text and phone conversations, I thought I got to know him, but now I wasn’t so sure. I wasn’t sure of anything at this very moment.

A magnetic pull and something unexplainable had my eyes searching Hunter out again. His heavy gaze met mine. My eyes dropped to his lips, though at this moment my sixth sense was warning me that I had no right to his lips, his hands, his body.

“Umm, Áine,” Maggie’s voice pulled my attention back to my cousin. “This is the guy,” she tilted her head at Hunter, “I’m supposed to marry.”

I turned my gaze back to Hunter, feeling slightly nauseous. My hands were clammy, my nails digging into the palms, and I realized they curled into fists. I struggled with the revelation that my chance at a normal relationship flew out the window before it even had a chance. Even worse revelation was that I was *jealous*.

The frustration at the useless feeling snaked beneath my skin, spreading the ugly green monster through every inch of my body, until it felt like jealousy would eat at me alive.

No, no, no. He’s mine! The voice inside my head was vehement. The intensity of my feelings should scare the shit out of me. It didn’t. The alternative scared me more,

the possibility of reverting back to never feel a man's touch. Hunter's touch.

My eyes traveled back to Hunter's dark brown eyes and thick, dark lashes that gave him an intense, brooding expression. My heart skipped a beat and then resumed its rhythm, but it kind of felt different. Like it started all over, to beat just for him.

Jesus. What. The. Hell?

He was Margaret's fiancé. It was the worst kind of *betrayal*. On my part. On Hunter's. I swallowed hard. That would be a hard pill to swallow. And the fact that I'd slept with him… Yeah, that would be an even harder pill to swallow. For Margaret.

God help me! It would seem I was fooled. For Christ's sake, I didn't even know his last name! I had no fucking clue who Hunter was. Did he know? How could he not; he certainly didn't seem the type to allow someone else to make arrangements for him.

Oh, sweet Jesus! I felt a horrible headache coming on.

"Áine, Margaret has done something to jeopardize the business arrangement I had." Jack's voice held the tension and the slightest clench of his teeth. My spine rigid, I forced my eyes away from Hunter.

Jack's words sunk in and I frowned. It made no sense. My step-father was adamant about not pulling women into his business. So how could she have jeopardized the business?

"Care to elaborate a bit? Because I'm either leaving with her or not at all."

I could be just as stubborn as Jack was. When Mom married him, she worried we'd butt heads. Surprisingly, we got along very well. Although there was no shortage of disagreements.

He took a deep breath in and exhaled again.

"Kiddo, it is not regular business stuff. Now is not the time to explain my business arrangements."

He searched for words, and I couldn't help but compare him to my biological dad. My father was never at loss for words and deceit came off his lips as smoothly as the truth. It was hard to tell when he was lying and when he wasn't. I guess it was a necessary trait of a politician.

Being a head of the Irish mafia, I saw similar traits in Jack. Except, he was unable to lie to me.

"Not exactly normal?" I asked, raising my eyebrow. "Jack, I know exactly about the type of business you run." I kept it short. I didn't know if the guests knew the type of business he was into, and I wasn't going to put him in a peculiar position. There was only one business I didn't tolerate. Trading flesh.

Jack's eyes went wide by the revelation, and for a moment his mouth actually hung open. Despite the tense situation, I chuckled softly.

I looked over his shoulder again and saw three pairs of eyes watching us. "I have some money saved up if you need-"

"No, I don't need money," he quickly cut me off.

"Let's have Ms. Evans join our discussion, Callahan." Hunter's voice pulled my attention back to him. Over the last month, he has been in my dreams… a lot. But it was always the same thing. The entire dream was distorted, and I could only see glimpses of it through the fog. I could never see his face, but I definitely heard him. There was crying and screaming, blood, and then his hand reaching out.

We are here to help you, he murmured softly through the fog, but each time I extended my hand, he'd disappear and I'd wake up covered in sweat, with a throbbing headache. By now, the throbbing headache was just as normal as breathing. The weird part was that my admission to him a week ago… or was it two now… it didn't seem to surprise him.

Hunter and I talked about a lot of things over the last six weeks, including my dreams and nightmares. Now, I prayed that my gut feeling wasn't wrong in trusting him.

"No, that won't be necessary," Jack objected.

"Considering Margaret's condition," Hunter replied calmly, his whole demeanor commanding, "I believe it is necessary."

"What condition?" I blurted out, my eyes on Margaret.

"I'm pregnant," she muttered low, shame written all over her.

"Oh." It wasn't what I expected. Although to be honest, I didn't know what to expect. The only thing I knew for certain was that I did not like how my stomach tied into a knot. I felt sick with the notion that Margaret had slept with Hunter and was now pregnant with his child.

"It's not that big of a deal," I muttered, though jealousy slithered through my veins like poison. "You'll get married soon anyhow." I felt flustered. ***I***, Áine Evans, who killed criminals without a second thought.

My eyes flickered to Hunter. God, he was the only man to make my body burn. Couldn't she marry anyone else?

Margaret's mouth thinned, and for a moment I worried I said my thoughts out loud.

"It's not his," she gritted.

"His?" I asked in confusion.

She tilted her head towards Hunter and spluttered, "It is not his."

It was stupid but the first thought in my mind that resonated was… Thank God. She wouldn't marry Hunter. And a twinge of regret hit me instantly for being so selfish.

I walked over to the closest chair and flopped down. "It's been a long day." And Hunter has been invading my dreams, along with some disturbing nightmares. "Can someone summarize it for me?"

Jack sat down too and pushed his hand through his hair. "Your mother won't be happy about this."

“I’m sure she’ll forgive you,” I retorted dryly. She pretty much forgave him everything. My mother was crazy about Jack and vice versa. I learned that they were childhood sweethearts, but then my mother married my dad. She never explained why, and I didn’t ask. I figured she’d tell me if she wanted me to know. Although I suspected it had something to do with Jack’s *business.* But Jack made her happy, and although I saw deep affection between my own parents, I never saw love. With my mother and Jack, I saw love in each glance and touch they shared, no matter how small.

“Margaret’s marriage to Cassio King would tie our two families together and make the alliance strong,” Jack explained exasperatedly. It was clear he didn’t want to pull me in.

Wait, what? She wasn’t marrying Hunter? Then the name pierced through my brain. *Cassio King.* I shot up to my feet and leaned over the desk that Jack sat behind, everyone else forgotten.

“King?” I growled. “Please tell me you did not arrange to have Margaret marry a fucking King,” I hissed, pissed off.

“Áine-” Margaret started but fury burned through my bloodstream. I didn’t even bother glancing behind me and kept my eyes on Jack.

“Might as well send her to the slaughter house,” I said, glaring at my stepfather. “How could you? Of all the damn men in this world! Fucking Kings!”

“Kiddo, Cassio-”

My hands fisted into balls. “Don’t kiddo me,” I warned. “You tell the Kings they can’t have her and cancel today’s engagement party. Or I swear Jack, I’ll make you regret ever making that arrangement.”

Jack’s eyes flashed with surprise. This side of me I rarely showed to anyone. They wanted to think of me as a fragile flower. That was fine by me. I used it to my advantage, but

I'd be damned if I'd sit and agree to have Margaret given to any of the King family members.

"I promise you, Áine, this is different." Jack tried to explain but my anger at him burned. The disappointment that he would be so careless tasted bitter.

I turned my head to Hunter, narrowing my eyes at him. "What is your connection to the Kings? His messengers?"

Yes, when my temper flared, the reason was out the window.

Silence ticked for several heartbeats before Margaret cleared her throat, shifting her crisscrossed legs uncomfortably. "This is Cassio King. And his brother Luca."

What the fuck? She must be confused. This guy's name was Hunter.

"They are Benito King's illegitimate sons," Jack added helpfully. Or not.

I blinked, confused. "What?"

Whispers in my mind. Ice in my veins. Hate in my heart. *You are not your father*, my comforting words to him rang in my ears, and somehow it felt like a slap in my face. Or maybe his, I didn't fucking know.

"Áine, meet Cassio and Luca King," Jack repeated. He probably thought I was daft, my reason having a hard time catching up. My head whipped to Jack and then back to the two.

Cassio and Luca King. In Jack's house!

Jack hated the Kings as much as I did. So why was he doing this?

Betrayal and another feeling inched into my heart. Jealousy was replaced with disgust. Self-disgust. I slept with *Cassio King*. My enemy. The only man that didn't make my body repulse and protest at his touch; the only man that could give me earth shattering orgasms was my enemy.

How could a single name change everything? I went from hope to desperation with a single name. Resentment

wrapped around my throat, choking the damn life out of me. A single goddamn name!

“You’ll remember my name.” The back of my skull hurt, and though the fall already happened, it felt like I hit it again and again. Warm liquid trickled down the back of my head, but I was scared to move, staring into the cruel eyes of the man that was thrusting into a crying woman, tearing her in half. “Marco motherfucking King.”

Bile tasted like acid in my throat, burning. My throat was raw at this point, but I refused to say a single word. Instead, I bit into my split lip hard enough to draw blood, the metallic taste on my tongue.

I blinked, forcing my mind to now. A haze swam in front of my eyes and a headache throbbing behind my temples. Goddamn it, I needed to see Dr. Taylor.

Ignoring my headache, I snapped my head to Cassio. *Cassio fucking King.* He and his brother were barely a few feet away from me. All I had to do was take a few steps, aim, shoot, and they’d be dead. Except, I didn’t have my handgun. I should start using my thigh holster all the damn time. This was such a perfect opportunity to take them out, but I couldn’t do hand-to-hand combat. Not with those two. Cassio and Luca looked too strong to fight them physically.

I narrowed my eyes at both of them in warning and noted Cassio’s surprised look. The next instance, Cassio’s gaze hardened a flicker, showing me his displeasure. Well, too fucking bad. Lying son of a bitch. He had to know who Margaret and I were the moment he saw us in the hallway in Vegas. Or even in Temptation, the nightclub. And he seduced me! *Me!*

“You hate us,” Luca stated, then chuckled softly. “Well, this is perfect.”

“Who doesn’t hate the Kings?” I retorted dryly, my voice dipping with anger. “I imagine you’d need a very small piece of paper to list those names.”

Jack chuckled. I was surprised he wasn't attacking them full force, instead of having them sit here like they owned the world. What in the bloody hell was my stepfather thinking when he allowed this arrangement to happen?

"Okay, kiddo. I would regularly agree with you but Luca and Cassio King haven't worked with Benito nor Marco."

My thoughts and hatred tripped.

"And you believe them?" I eyed them suspiciously. I didn't trust them. None of them. "Maybe they just want the power for themselves."

I haven't heard a single good thing about the King family for as long as I could remember.

"Which is the reason we are connecting the Callahan line with the King's."

I shook my head. "That's the dumbest plan ever."

"Agreed," Margaret muttered and we shared a glance.

"Now that Benito is dead, Marco King's havoc is uniting the worst type of criminals. This will strengthen us and protect our people."

I rolled my eyes. "Again, a stupid plan," I argued. "If he is causing such havoc, why don't you just kill Marco? He's a little weasel anyhow."

Laughter boomed through the office and my head snapped in its direction. It was Hunter's. I shook my head. Not Hunter, the fucking liar. Cassio's.

"It is not that simple," Jack added, and I inwardly frowned. "Otherwise, he would have been dead a long time ago."

"He should have been dead a long time ago," I muttered. "Both Benito and Marco." I tilted my head towards Luca and Cassio King. "All of them. It would have spared this world a lot of trouble."

Something passed Cassio's face, and for some reason, regret hit me at my harsh words.

"And it would have caused a full blown war in the underworld," Cassio added. I had a feeling he was hiding

behind a cold mask.

“It sounds to me like you two are not up to the task,” I challenged him.

Cassio kept his cool, but annoyance crossed Luca’s expression. I didn’t give a damn. I didn’t trust them. Hunter, no Cassio, may have succeeded in causing my body to bend to his will, but now that I knew the truth, I wouldn't bend for him any longer.

Damn it! I was looking forward to having a date with him and now… well, needless to say, it was out the fucking window.

“Despite Marco’s dwindling forces, he still has support and the alliances that were faithful to my father. Until we destroy his leftover businesses, we risk a lot of innocent people getting hurt if we attack openly.”

I glared at him. He certainly had an answer for everything. “Well, get to work.” *Asshole*. However, my parents taught me well, so I swallowed the insult.

“Well, this is awkward,” Margaret muttered. “Áine wants to kill them both.”

“Like I said,” I deadpanned. “There is a long list of people that want the members of the King family dead. If we killed you two now, people wouldn’t bat an eye.”

“Áine!” Jack’s voice warned but I ignored him. I didn’t need his babysitting. I could hold my own.

“You can try,” Luca chimed in lightly, his eyes shining with amusement. “Trust me, we are not that easy to kill.” Smug asshole. “And if it was that easy to kill off Marco, we would have done it a long time ago.”

Though I wholeheartedly agreed with killing Marco, the way he said those words sent chills through my heart. They had no scruples in killing their family. It sounded like these two men only had allegiances to themselves. Marco King had no qualms about anything. He killed women, children, anyone that got in his way. If these two grew up the same then I had no doubt they had similar values.

Was I being slightly hypocritical after the words I spoke to him over the phone? Undoubtedly.

“Kiddo, Cassio King is our ticket to getting rid of Marco and pushing him out of our territory.” Jack’s words had me turning back to my stepfather. “I kept you out of all this, and I know you don’t know much about what he’s doing, but trust me when I tell you he has to be eliminated.”

Jack had no idea.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “So what? Use Margaret as a pawn in some agreement to fix things that people in both of your worlds fucked up?” I took a deep breath in and then slowly exhaled. I never lectured Jack or anyone on their way of life. If they trafficked women, I just killed them. Other things… well, it was their business. “Please don’t tell me you trust him. He lied about his own name for Pete’s sake.”

Jack Callahan was a smart man. He couldn’t just blindly trust him. Could he? The moment I saw a stormy expression pass Jack’s eyes, I knew I said the wrong thing.

“What do you mean?” Jack growled. “You two know each other?”

Shit, I said too much. There was no way I’d tell Jack about my little rendezvous with Hunter two years ago or six weeks ago. That probably wouldn’t go over well. Besides, what happens in Vegas and nightclubs, stays in Vegas and nightclubs.

Margaret answered before I had a chance to come up with a neutral response. “We got stuck in the elevator in Vegas with these two,” she muttered. “That’s all.”

Jack studied my face, but I kept silent. It was better not to say too much. I bit into my lip to stop any words or excuses from slipping through my lips. It was a habit to start blabbing when nervous.

“It’s my middle name,” Cassio chimed in, breaking the tense silence. “Cassio Hunter King.”

My head whipped in his direction. Okay, so he omitted a bit of his name. An omission was still a lie. Right?

I wished I could read this stranger better. I thought I had come to know him over the last six weeks. Now, I wasn't so sure. His expression betrayed none of his thoughts, and I was desperate to know what he was thinking. Jack seemed to trust him, and they had a common goal to take Marco King down. But what if it was a trap; we couldn't afford to trust any King.

My eyes studied his face. He was beautiful, high cheekbones, angular nose, full lips, and jet-black hair. I'd lie if I said he didn't impact me. My eyes lowered to his full lips and my belly clenched. I could remember so well how those lips felt on me. The only time I ever enjoyed a man's touch was him. Only him. And he did so much more. Why couldn't I feel that with anyone else? Or even better, why couldn't he be anyone, fucking *anyone*, just not a King.

Pushing all my quivering desire for this man aside, I focused on the topic at hand.

"Either way, Jack. Marrying Margaret to Cassio King or any family member of the King family is nuts. And wrong on so many levels! Those bastards are-"

"Áine, that's enough!" Jack's voice held a warning and his blue eyes darkened. His anger had never been directed at me. I went to open my mouth to say something but immediately shut it. There was only so far I could push my stepfather. But he was crazy if he thought Margaret would be a sacrificial lamb. I wouldn't let it happen.

My eyes fleeted back to Hunter… No, not Hunter. Cassio. Goddamn it! Why did I hate the idea of him being an enemy so much?

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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ÁINE

Cassio Hunter King.

I heard of his ruthlessness, and I wasn't even an active part of the mafia world. The stories of men he killed and his brutality were whispered all over the world. Benito King was a crazed, bloodthirsty lunatic. But Cassio King, he was rumored to be a cold killer. Dispassionate. Harsh. Intense.

Except, his eyes were kind of warm. Mentally, I shook my head. It was deceiving. Everything about him was deceiving. Yet, counterintuitive to everything I had just learned about him, something deep inside of me retaliated at the knowledge that he was a man I should hate.

I watched him, trying to reconcile that knowledge with the man that comforted me in the elevator during my panic attack. The man that ensured my pleasure first and foremost. With the man that talked to me over the phone. Yes, there was a hardness about him, but for some reason, protectiveness and fairness screamed underneath it all. Maybe my instincts were failing me. I wasn't great at reading people, but usually my instinct warned me of bad people. I called it my self-preservation radar. But my instinct wasn't screaming at me to keep away from him. Instead, even now as we watched each other intensely,

something about him nagged at my memory and the need to remember was like oxygen.

Maybe it was my imagination. After all, our worlds were vastly different.

Well, they were until my mother married Jack. Then why did something stir deep inside my memories every time I looked at him.

Truthfully, this whole world that Jack belonged to was such a different world from the one I grew up in. I knew Jack and his men were involved in shady businesses and illegal dealings. I also knew some of the families arranged their daughter's marriage to gain power or money. It was mind blowing and wrong on so many levels. Almost like trafficking but with the parents' approval. It made me want to fucking kill them all for even contemplating it.

Either way, it would seem Cassio King was the man Margaret was supposed to marry, and she was pregnant. Well, good for her and I fully intended to support her and defend her against this ridiculous arrangement Jack has made.

Though I couldn't deny the bite of jealousy at the idea of Margaret with Hunter sent through me. Even worse was the knowledge that the bastard slept with me, knowing he was engaged to my cousin. *Bastard*. Goddamn bastard!

"Margaret carrying another man's child creates a problem in this plan," Jack finally concluded. "I gave my word."

"Well, you shouldn't have made plans without running it by Margaret first," I snapped. Truthfully, I was agitated at myself as much as him. "You know, it takes two to make marriage work." I turned my head towards Cassio and Luca. "This bullshit idea of arranged marriages should be torched to the ground and banned."

"No arguments from me," Margaret drawled. "Or maybe we can force them to marry someone they don't want. See how they like it."

My lip quirked. “I kind of like that idea. Let’s start with your brother. Or maybe these two here.”

“Both of you stop it,” Jack warned us with a groan.

We shrugged, sharing a glance. Jack could be tough, but he’d never hurt us.

“You could still go through with the marriage and just raise the baby as your own,” Jack suggested to Cassio. I had to swallow a bite of protests forming on my tongue.

Why did the line ‘*I volunteer as tribute*’ keep coming to my mind? Damn *Hunger Games*. I only wanted to volunteer so I could get closer to Marco and kill the bastard that tortured me in my nightmares. Eventually, I’d kill Cassio too. *Maybe. I don’t fucking know*.

“That’s just cruel,” I protested. “To let a baby go around any King member. It’s not the baby's fault you made some stupid arrangement with ***him***.” I tilted my head in Cassio’s direction.

“I don’t want to do it.” Margaret’s voice was that of a wounded animal.

My head snapped to Margaret. There was a trace of an emotion lurking in her eyes, which I had never seen before. *She is scared*, I realized. We both held back our fears, it would seem.

“I guess that’s that,” I announced. “Can’t force her to do it.”

“Actually, I could,” Cassio stated calmly. He didn’t seem upset that Margaret was pregnant. But there was a beast lurking in that expensive suit, ready to strike. I could practically taste it. Cassio King had an agenda, I just had to figure out what it was. “Breaking an arrangement like this causes wars. In the name of honor, I can demand her death as retribution. Or Callahan’s.”

“What?” My mouth dropped to the floor. There went the protectiveness and fairness I attributed to Cassio out the window. “You would do that?”

My eyes darted to Jack and I saw the truth in his eyes. He would let him do that? What kind of stupid honor was that?

Ruthless. The rumors about Cassio King were true.

He wore a dark suit with a silver watch and diamond cufflinks, dressing up for the engagement announcement. The suit accented his broad shoulders and strong body, it fit him like a glove. If it wasn't for those tattoos on his hands that I knew covered his whole arm, and that harshness in his eyes, he could pass for just another good looking guy. A totally hot man with a strong body that could smash you to pieces… but hey, who was worried about that? Not when he could dish out orgasms to keep you going for years.

"This is a major obstacle in the plan to connect the Callahan and King line," Cassio's voice was sending shivers down my spine. "Lives are being lost because of my half-brother and his forceful grip on New York."

"Well, why don't you handle your brother?" I snapped. "After all, he is *your* brother. Why should Margaret have to pay the price for your fucked up family relations?"

God, I wished this man was easier to read. I couldn't tell whether I pissed him off or he just didn't give a shit about what I was saying.

"It is your problem as much as mine," Cassio drawled. "Since Marco has his eyes set on Callahan territory and its women."

I glanced at Jack for confirmation. Nobody has said anything about Marco King coming for Callahan territory. Not that I or Margaret would have known. Jack spoke about his business only to his men and my mother.

Wait! He said *its women*.

The meaning of it lingered in the silence while we all sat watching each other. Jack got up and poured himself a stiff one. Scotch from the looks of it.

"Drink anyone?" he offered, but everyone shook their heads in refusal except Margaret.

“I’ll have one,” Margaret said.

My head snapped to her. “You can’t have alcohol,” I scolded her.

“Shit,” she muttered. “I forgot.”

There was anguish in her eyes. I’d recognize it anywhere. She was scared, whether it was about her pregnancy or what would happen, I wasn’t sure. I wanted to assure her I’d be on her side, and I wouldn’t let anything happen. Arrangement or no arrangement. But with Cassio and Luca King in the room, as well as Jack, I couldn’t say anything. I just hoped she could read it in my eyes.

The clinking of ice cubes had me returning my attention to my stepfather. Jack’s hand tightened around his glass, his knuckles turning white. This was bad, really bad.

“Áine, I didn’t want to do this,” Callahan muttered under his breath. “I didn’t want to pull you into this, and I promised your mother I’d keep you out of all of it at all cost.”

I frowned at his words. It seemed he was going for cryptic announcements today. From the moment Jack and Mom got together, he had protected me, but his comment about keeping me out of all of it made no sense.

“What do you mean?” I questioned him.

Ignoring me, he picked up the phone.

“Tell my wife I need her in my office,” he gritted out into the headset. The look in his eyes once he hung up was the one I never saw before. Anxiousness. In all the years, it was the first time I saw him nervous.

He turned his hardened gaze to Margaret. “You will leave us now. Stay in the house. I expect you to remain here for dinner… for Áine.”

Resentment hit me that he’d talk to her like that. “Don’t speak to her like that,” I warned in a soft voice. “Shit happens. It’s not her fault.”

“Maybe,” he spoke in a low voice. “But she knew about the engagement. Getting knocked up was not the way to

respect the agreement. And now you'll have to pay for it."

I frowned and confusion hit me. Sharing a look with Margaret, I saw she wasn't following either, but his words upset her. Tears glistened in her eyes. And she *never* cried.

"It's okay," I mouthed low to her. Jack didn't know crap. He should blame himself or Cassio King for that matter. My eyes shifted to the two King members again but their faces were masks, their expressions unreadable.

After all these years, I never dreamt this would be how I'd learn the identity of Cassio and Luca King. How did they keep themselves in the shadows? Not a single picture or piece of information on them on the net.

"I should go too," I muttered and was half way sitting up from my chair. I needed to get away from here and get my head together.

"No. Stay." Cassio gave the order, and I froze at his cold tone. I met Jack's eyes and he nodded. My sixth sense was sending warning flares throughout my body. The world was going to hell in a handbasket if I was taking orders from Cassio King.

I watched Margaret walk out of the room, throwing me a worried backward glance.

I smiled at her, although I was sure it was a shaky smile at best, and again, I mouthed to her *I'm good*. It took a lot to get to me. Okay, maybe I feigned being braver than I really was but it was no use to stress her out too.

Lifting my right brow and faking the bravado, I turned my attention to all three men. Their eyes on me, I studied them. Cassio's expression was unreadable, Luca had amusement in his, and my stepfather, he seemed agitated and nervous.

"Okay, will someone start talking? This is grating my nerves and I still have a drawing to work on for the new building. I don't have all night for whatever the hell is going on."

Mentally, I high fived myself. Hopefully, it was convincing enough. Though probably not, considering these two men saw me fall apart a month ago in a broken down elevator.

Cassio's lips tugged upwards into a half-smile and confirmed my suspicion. He totally didn't buy my bravado. But it gave me a glimpse of the man I met in the club two years ago and then again in Vegas.

"Should I tell her, or will you, Callahan?" Cassio's and Jack's eyes locked. There was a challenge in his, while Jack's gaze held resignation and regret.

"We'll wait until her mother comes, Cassio," Jack replied in a firm tone. Why did I have a hard time thinking of him as Cassio? He'd forever be Hunter in my mind.

"You know, Jack," I muttered, "I'm well past the age where I need Mom's permission to do anything or hear any news with her holding my hand."

"I know, kiddo." His voice was affectionate, and I had a feeling whatever I was about to hear would change my world forever. The room was so quiet that I could hear seconds ticking off from the clock on the mantel.

The silence was broken when my mother came through the door, her eyes roaming the room. She nodded at Cassio and Luca, recognition flickering in her eyes. *She knows them*. I didn't know how I knew, but I was certain she had met them before. Maybe when Jack arranged this whole shenanigan and circus of marriage arrangements.

Jack immediately went to her and wrapped his arms around Mom. "Thank you for coming, love."

The love I saw in Jack's eyes every time he gazed upon my mother made him a good man in my book. I would forgive him a lot, just on the account he always took care of my mom. Yes, he was the head of an Irish criminal organization, but he loved his family and protected it. At all costs.

I was happy those two found each other. Happy endings were what made it all worth it. They both sacrificed years without each other and finally found a way to each other again.

“Of course. What’s going on?” They shared a look and I wondered if it told Mom everything. Sometimes those two seemed to be on the same wave link or frequency. “Áine, when did you get here?” she asked, surprised.

“I just got here,” I muttered. My mother came over and gave me a hug. She always did it. No matter when she saw me, whether two hours ago or two months ago, she always gave me a hug like she hadn’t seen me in months. I returned the hug and pressed a kiss onto her cheek. “You look nice, Mom.”

She was already dressed for tonight's event wearing an elegant red gown that came down to her ankles. Her hair was up in a bun and the only jewelry she wore was a diamond necklace that Jack gifted her for their wedding. And her wedding ring. Truthfully, the damn thing was worth a fortune, so she didn’t need anything else to make a statement. She might have been in her fifties, but my mother still looked amazing.

“Working late again?” she asked me with a smile. I threw a glance down at my outfit. I wore an off-white business dress and a matching blazer. Nothing fancy, but it hid the nasty bruise from the bullet I took through the Kevlar vest. Thank God for the bulletproof vests. The bruise was well worth it.

I shrugged. “You didn’t give me much notice, so I didn’t have time to stop at my place to change.”

Her fingers brushed against my cheek, then she looked back at Jack. “What’s going on?” she asked him again.

Jack took a deep breath in, then exhaled slowly.

“Margaret’s engagement fell through,” Jack started, not wasting time. He was never the one for beating around the bush. Mom’s eyes darted to Cassio, and it confirmed my

suspicion that Mom knew who Margaret's intended was. "She's pregnant. Refused to say who the father is."

"Oh." *That was exactly my response*, I thought wryly. Then something flashed in her eyes and her eyes snapped to Jack's. "No, Jack. No, no, no." She kept shaking her head in panic, and I wondered what she was saying *no* to. I watched the scene unfold, trying to pick up any clues from their expression and failing. "Please don't tell me you are considering what I think."

The guilt was written all over Jack's face. It would seem my stepfather was considering whatever my mother objected to.

"Jack, you can't," she begged. "It's not fair."

"I'm sorry, love." I wasn't quite sure what he was apologizing for. "I never expected Margaret to do this."

"The engagement has to be announced tonight," Cassio stated. "The guests are already arriving, and this cannot be delayed."

I must have been the only clueless one, as my gaze ping-ponged between everyone.

My mom gasped on a whimper and my eyes turned back to her, watching her.

"Emily, my dear... he knows," Jack's voice was drenched with regret. *Who knows what?* My eyes kept darting between all of them, waiting for someone to start explaining. At this rate, my eyeballs would get a whiplash.

Mom's eyes sought out Cassio. "Please, you can't," she choked out. "S-she… she can't. Please."

I frowned. My mother never begged, so it had to be something big. Watching all four of them, it started to feel like it was something critical I was missing here. I chewed on my lower lip, waiting for someone to start explaining before I exploded with tension. My head kept turning back and forth between Jack and my mother, then to Cassio and Luca, in anticipation for someone to start talking. If I didn't stop, I'd give myself a serious case of whiplash or dizziness.

My eyes darted to Cassio and Luca, but they seemed to know exactly what was going on. There was no curiosity nor surprise on their faces. Although maybe they were just good actors.

“Can someone clue me in?” I finally chimed in. I couldn’t take the tension any longer.

“C’mon, guys,” I choked half-jokingly. “Y’all are starting to freak me out.”

Jack finally took pity on me.

“Kiddo, the only way not to break this arrangement with the King family is for you to marry in place of Margaret.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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ÁINE

My lips parted as I watched my stepfather, waiting for him to start laughing at his bad joke, but his expression remained grim. A strangled laugh escaped me, my stomach dropped, and I almost choked on my next breath.

"Right," I scoffed. "You almost got me. You said the Callahan and King line had to come together. You seem to forget I'm not a Callahan."

The room was eerily quiet and Mom shared a fleeting glance with Jack. Something big was about to happen. I didn't know how I knew it, but I felt it in my gut. I could hear my heartbeat pulsing in my ears… or was it someone else's. Or maybe it was just thundering in my ears as I watched my stepfather and mother, waiting… not sure for what.

"Áine, baby," it was my mother that finally broke the silence. "Jack is your father."

Boom!

"Stepfather," I corrected, my tone hoarse.

"No, baby." I could see my mother teetering on the edge, her hands scrunched into fists; the material of her gown trapped between her fingers. "Jack is your biological father."

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

“What the fuck?” I exploded, blood rushing in my ears. “This is not even funny.”

“Áine! Language, please.” My mother was worried about the language after she just dropped this bombshell.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” I hissed furiously. “We are going to worry about my language after you drop a bomb like that? You two are grasping at straws right now… this is just some temporary way to delay you finding another cousin to marry this guy.” I pointed with my head towards Cassio, his good looks completely wiped out of my mind. He no longer counted in my book at all. *I think.* “When in fact, you shouldn’t have made the arrangement in the first place!”

My anger simmered that Mom would throw a bomb on me, just like that. In front of strangers at that.

“No, it is the truth. Jack is your father. Honey, you were never supposed to know.” The strain in my mother’s voice was clear but what the fuck! “It’s a complicated story.”

“You don’t say!” Anger welled in the pit of my stomach. “It didn’t occur to you to share that piece of information with me for the past twenty-five years.” I rose off my chair and glared at Cassio and Luca. There was no doubt in my mind they knew, the question was how. “They knew! So how in the fuck didn’t I know?”

“Kiddo, it wasn’t your mother’s fault.” Jack jumped to my mother’s defense. He always defended her, and until today, I loved that about him. But right now, I resented it.

“Oh, I am pretty sure it is,” I argued in a slightly elevated voice, not caring who heard us, locking my eyes on Mom and Jack. “Because we all know how babies are made.” Jack’s hand reached up to pull at his hair while my mother’s knuckles were so white now from her hard clenching. “Did Dad know?”

I knew my voice sounded accusatory but damn it. Everything I had ever known, just went up in smoke. No,

not smoke. Fucking flames! My mom's lips thinned and her shoulders slumped.

"Well, did he?" I asked again, my own voice sounding high-pitched to my ears.

"Baby, we should have this conversation in private."

My gut reaction was to start screaming, throwing stuff, but instead, I took a calming breath. And another. Breathe in. Breathe out. Again.

It was the first time I had used my breathing exercise for anger rather than claustrophobic fear and panic.

"Why bother?" I uttered, disgusted. "It would seem they already know. I'm the only one clueless here."

"Don't be sassy, Áine," Mom spat angrily. "I'm still your mother."

Her anger only fueled my rage further.

"Did. Dad. Know?" I gritted through my teeth.

My mother and I locked gazes, the battle of wills we never had finally happening.

Then she took a deep breath in and exhaled in resignation.

"Yes." Taken aback, I stared at her in shock. It wasn't what I expected. "Thomas knew you weren't biologically his. We struggled getting pregnant and years of fertility treatments and miscarriages took a toll. Years of trying wore us down. Your Grandma Gladys passed away, and I came back home alone for the funeral. I ran into Jack. One thing led to another and we-"

I waved my hand in dismissal and to stop her from detailing their sexual encounter. Because ewww.

"Okay, I don't need the gruesome details." I stood up from my spot and started pacing back and forth. All these years, I was completely clueless. No wonder Jack welcomed me into his family with open arms. "Jesus, this is so fucked up."

"Honey, please try to understand."

I stopped my pacing and glared at her.

“Understand what?” I uttered back angrily. “That you decided to have someone else’s kid.” My eyes went to Jack. “And you were fine with it? Having someone else raise your kid? I honestly don’t remember ever seeing you until you started dating Mom.”

Jack remained numb, refusing to answer.

“He didn’t know,” my mom whispered. “Until you were about fourteen.”

I frowned. Fourteen. That year was a blur. I could barely remember any of it. The pain in my temple increased, and I pinched the top of my nose to ease it. It wasn’t time for a headache.

I walked over to the window of Jack’s office that looked out onto the entrance of the house. I could see a line of cars with people pulling up. Jack’s hand selected associates. For the engagement party. It was supposed to be Margaret and Cassio’s announcement. I wondered if it even mattered to him who he married. And how in the hell did he know I was Jack’s biological daughter? Did everyone know except for me? I wished Margaret would have told me about her pregnancy, maybe we could have done something. I would have been more prepared.

“Hell will freeze over before I’ll marry any member of the King family,” I finally said, turning around to face my audience. “And this damn love triangle with Dad…” Shit, which Dad? “Jack and Dad,” I corrected myself, “…is beyond messed up.” I glared at Jack and my mom, then shook my head again. “So fucking messed up.”

“Baby, it wasn’t like we planned to get pregnant.”

“Honestly, Mom, I don’t think I can stomach this right now. I haven’t eaten lunch and this revelation just kind of soured my mood.”

I went to leave when Jack’s voice stopped me.

“Unless you agree to take Margaret’s place,” Jack said in a strained voice, “we’ll be forced to break the agreement

and me go back on my word. It will be the first time I have done that in my life, but for you, I will."

His words made me stop and my hand faltered before reaching for the doorknob.

I raised my eyes to the ceiling. *Way to make me feel shitty.*

I knew enough to understand breaking your word in Jack's world could mean death. Jesus, he was my father. Even before I knew that, I'd never want him dead and would do anything to save him. Of course, I wouldn't want him in trouble for me. Though theoretically he managed to make this mess.

Today was not a good day.

I slowly turned around and met four sets of eyes. I could see anguish in Mom's and worry in Jack's. I just wished I could read Cassio better. Strangely, Luca seemed amused but Cassio… I just couldn't get a single emotion out of his dark eyes.

Careful what you wish for, right? Just seconds before I found out this man was Cassio King, I almost volunteered to take Margaret's spot. And now… well, now everything went to fucking hell.

"Now what?" I bit out, facing my parents and the Kings. *The Kings,* I scoffed to myself. *How appropriate?* They sat there and even though they were in Jack's home, they portrayed power and dominance.

I weighed my options, but there weren't that many. If I said no, Jack would be in trouble. Mom too. Marriage never crossed my mind. I was still too young and had previously had issues in the physical department. The thought of marriage and any physical closeness that came along with it had sent terror down my spine.

But with this man, my body just responded. In the best way possible and butterflies worked overtime. So okay… from that aspect, I was on board with marital activities. There was no doubt he'd expect me to sleep with him. Men

like that just didn't take no for an answer. Not that a fiber of my body wanted to say no to him. Even now, a tingling sensation inched all over my skin.

I peered Cassio's way under my lashes. He was still my enemy. The secret business I inherited from my father… crap, I guess he wasn't my biological father. I couldn't think about that right now! But I could get useful information if I was connected to the Kings. It was one way to bring them down. For the past five years, all we managed was intercepting some of their shipments and almost killing ourselves in the process.

Maybe I'd just play along until I brought them all down. And what better way than to do it from the inside. There was no way in hell I'd sit back and do nothing while the Kings profited from smuggling women and forcing them into sex slaves. Besides, they had to pay for killing my father.

And at the same time get laid, my pussy screamed. I shook my head with disbelief. Something was seriously wrong with my priorities.

But then Hunter's words from our phone call pierced through my brain.

"*My father, who wasn't much of one, wasn't a good man. He destroyed a lot of families."* Wasn't that what he said? Maybe he was working against Benito and Marco King all along. All this was just too much information thrown my way.

"Baby, if you-" my mother started speaking, but I quickly stopped her.

"Okay, I'll do it," I blurted out quickly, scared I'd change my mind. At the minimum, this agreement would buy me some time. I had some time before we sealed it, and I walked down the aisle.

I turned my gaze to Cassio. Something flashed in his eyes, but he masked it so quickly, I couldn't hone in on it. Why did I get a sense this man had his own agenda and

dangerous secrets? And without a doubt, I felt like we were all playing into his scheme.

“Áine, are you sure?” Jack questioned me. I was surprised he would even give me a chance to refuse. I expected relief from him and immediate acceptance. Instead, there was worry etched on his face. My mother wasn’t much better. She was always a worrier so it was no surprise this latest development set her on edge.

“If you’d rather I don’t do it,” I muttered, “I’m perfectly fine with that too.”

We watched each other and now that Mom said Jack was my biological dad, it kind of made sense. I must have been blind not to notice it before. From the moment I met him, he made me feel at ease. Even as the truth unfolded about the business dealings he was in, I still felt safe under his protection. I coughed it up to Jack’s charm.

The color of his eyes is the exact shade of mine, the thought stuck me. In fact, Margaret and her brothers… we all shared the same color eyes. Neither one of my parents had blue eyes. When I questioned my mother, she said the color came from my dad’s side of the family. I guess she didn’t lie.

When you lie, Áine, stick to the truth as much as possible. Those were the words of my dad, well turns out not the real dad, the prime minister. He must have given the same tip to my mother.

“Can I have a moment with Áine?” Cassio’s question had me darting my eyes his way. What could he possibly want to talk about alone?

Maybe he wants to give me another orgasm, I thought wryly. I mentally rolled my eyes and slapped myself. Orgasms were not the priority here.

Jack’s eyes came to me, questioning me silently whether I was okay with it. I nodded.

“Okay, then,” Jack agreed, concluding the conversation. “We’ll give you two some privacy. We have to go welcome

our guests. You two come out when you are ready."

Jesus, I wasn't ready for this. I nodded without a word and noted Cassio did the same. Luca and Jack headed out of the office, my mother lingering hesitantly back.

"It's ok, Mom," I assured her.

She came to me and wrapped me into a hug. "I'm sorry, baby. I never wanted you to find out… this way."

I had a sense she meant to say she never meant for me to find out at all, but I kept the words back. I hugged her back. She was a good mother and she loved me, always there for me. Who was I to judge her? Though telling me the truth would have been nice.

She took a step back and I nodded. Then she tilted her head in Cassio's direction and headed out of the office, leaving the two of us alone.

I sat back in the chair. Cassio sat composed, opposite of me, barely a few feet away from me while I just went through several lifetime shocks. It took less than thirty minutes for my entire world to turn upside down.

We locked gazes and heat rushed through my body, going dangerously south. Jesus, this wasn't healthy. I drowned in those brown eyes, a flicker of something familiar in them pulling me in deeper and deeper.

My temple throbbed and an image flashed in my mind. *Dark tunnel, sounds of bullets in the distance, a man running with me in his arms. His crisp scent with something dark and woody. Cedar scent.*

I blinked my eyes and stared at Cassio. That scent! It was familiar; I could smell it now. It wasn't Jack's cologne. A sharp, piercing pain shot through my skull, making my eyes tear from the intensity of it. I pinched my nose, then followed by rubbing my temple.

Each time I looked into Cassio's eyes, I felt sucker punched straight into my lungs and my memory revolted. It demanded to know why he caused my mind to fumble.

I frowned. How appropriate! He made my mind and my body fumble while he seemed completely unaffected. Cassio was unaffected but I thought the man I came to know as Hunter would have been. Maybe? So damn confusing.

He sat back casually, his suit jacket unbuttoned, revealing he had a gun holster underneath it. Not that I was surprised, since he was part of the mafia. Most of the men that worked for Jack, including Jack, wore those on a daily basis. I would start wearing one around my thigh starting tomorrow. Hell if I'd be caught unaware and vulnerable.

Geez, my father was probably rolling in his grave seeing that I had agreed to marry someone in the mafia. Not just someone! A member of the family that killed him.

I studied Cassio's face. He was extremely handsome with that jet-black hair and golden skin. But his eyes I liked the most. Even with the knowledge of who he was and that I shouldn't like anything about him, I loved his eyes.

I bet with that face and that body, he had women throwing themselves at him around each corner. Benito King wasn't a bad looking guy, though he looked a lot better dead in my book. It would seem Cassio, just like his father, was into power and building an empire. Or did he build it already and this was his last claim to the throne? I wasn't part of Jack's world nor dealings, but I knew enough that connecting Callahan's name to the King's would make Cassio King live up to his last name.

Somehow the knowledge that connecting his empire with Callahan's was Cassio's main objective irked me. And that he was going to marry Margaret left a slightly bitter taste in my mouth, especially after the night we shared in Vegas and things we shared over the last six weeks via texts.

I was envious. And I hated it! I have never been the envious type, and I certainly shouldn't give a damn about

any member of the King family. The only objective was to destroy them all. Yet now, I hesitated.

“Nice to see you again, Áine,” he purred in his deep voice and it felt like a gentle caress by the wind. A tremor went through my body at the thought of him touching me. *Shit!*

Now that everyone cleared out of the office, his face wasn’t a cold, unmoving mask. He seemed more approachable, relaxed. I found that I liked him relaxed, despite everything, which was insane.

He studied me just as curiously as I studied him. And there was that sinfully arrogant smile. Like he knew something I didn’t. All my bravado melted away as we stared at each other, this chemistry between us burning it all to ash. Truth was, I wanted to explore this attraction further. Enemy or not. It was what had kept me going for the past six weeks, and I thought he wanted to explore it too. The question was who would be the victor in the end.

“So,” I started, my voice raspier than I’d like.

“So,” he repeated with a small quirk of his lip. I had a sense this man rarely smiled.

“What should I call you?” I questioned him. We might as well start with easy questions. “Hunter or Cassio? Or King?” I added the last bit sarcastically.

“Only my mother called me Hunter,” he replied. “You can call me whatever you’d like.”

Oh, I could come up with a few creative words.

I chuckled despite myself. “That’s leaving the door wide open for interpretation. You know that, right?” He didn’t seem concerned. “I could start with… douchebag,” I added. I had to stop myself from saying hottie. Good God, I had to exercise some self-control.

But then his words hit me. He said only his mother called him Hunter. While the information on Cassio King was scarce, or nonexistent, there was one article that stood

out. It was about his mother, the beautiful Penelope DiMauro.

It clicked then. His mother; I bet he was going against his brother Marco because of his mother. I recalled a picture of a beautiful woman that accompanied the article. She had a sad smile on her face, an infant in her arm and holding a little boy's hand. He couldn't be older than six or so. It had to be Cassio. The column said she killed herself, driven to madness.

"How old are you anyhow?" I asked him when in fact, there were more important questions I wanted to ask.

"Forty."

My lips parted in shock. He surprised me. He didn't look forty. Not at all!

"Hmmm," I muttered. "That's a significant age gap."

But then he wasn't expecting to marry me, was he? *I'm not his first choice.* There it was again, the little green monster in my heart. Maybe the problem was that I got a taste of him and how delicious sinning would be with my perfect stranger. And since that day, I had been dying for another taste of him.

If I had known who he was, would I have ever let him touch me? Maybe he preferred women like my cousin and now he was stuck with me?

Margaret was twenty-eight. Even that was quite an age gap. But between me and him, fifteen years… yeah, that was quite significant.

Regardless, my body liked Cassio's touch. The incident in the elevator from Las Vegas flashed in my mind. I was in such a panic that his touch actually calmed me, which in itself was bizarre. Usually when panic hit, it was hard to pull me back. My mother had never been able to do it. But this man did it almost effortlessly.

"Your father killed my dad," I blurted out.

"I'm sorry." He seemed sincere. Our phone conversation flashed in my mind - when he spoke of his father hurting

the families of his best friends. “Thomas Evans was a good man.” I nodded. He was a good man. He sacrificed a lot to fight crime on flesh trading. “He intercepted quite a few of Benito’s shipments. So Benito retaliated, in more than one way.”

How many ways? I wanted to know everything. I knew Benito had been after Dad for years until he finally got him. A bullet in the skull and my dad perished forever. I heard Benito got a bullet too, and I couldn’t help but think of the irony. He got what he deserved, and the only regret was that I wasn’t the one that put a bullet into his skull.

“When is the wedding supposed to happen?” I rasped the question.

“This weekend.”

“Isn’t that kind of pushy?” I retorted dryly. “You two were going to get engaged only today.”

“This has been planned out for a while.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course.” Well, this was going swell. “What if I had plans for the weekend?” *And every other for the rest of my life!*

“I guess they have changed now,” he retorted with dark amusement in his tone.

Easy for him to say. I had a secret life I led and nobody besides Margaret knew about it. It was the main reason I insisted on my own apartment. It allowed me to go in and out as needed without additional explanations.

“Considering this was kind of thrown on me last minute, the date should be changed.”

“No.”

Just no! No explanation. Nothing. Just you do as I say. Yeah, he was crazy if he thought that was how it would go.

I stood up from my chair, smoothing my palms over my dress, then strode to the door with my back stiff, but before I exited, I threw Cassio a glance over my shoulder.

“You might have won the battle, Cassio King,” I warned him. “But I’ll win the war.”

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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CASSIO

Leaning against the wall, I watched Áine handle the guests throughout our engagement dinner. She refused to change. Whatever. Fine with me. I'd choose my battles wisely with her.

With my hands in my pockets, I observed her smile and how she gave the same amount of attention to each guest. Diplomacy was ingrained into her from an early age. She grew up in the spotlight, thanks to Thomas Evans' rapidly growing political career until his untimely death.

She would be a perfect wife. From the look on her face, nobody would have ever guessed this arrangement happened with a last minute change in the bride.

Fake bride for a real bride, I thought smugly to myself.

Nobody knew it except Luca, Nico, and myself. And Luciano, of course. I wished Nico and Bianca could have made it. She wasn't feeling well, and I imagined thinking about being surrounded by mobsters didn't sit well with my sister nor my brother-in-law.

My sister.

I would have never dreamt I had one. Yet here I was and couldn't be happier. She was family and with her upbringing outside the underworld, she could help me with Áine. Both my sister and my little nieces. Nobody could

resist them. Even Alexei cracked a smile with Hannah and Arianna around.

Áine kept a diplomatic smile on her face, thanking everyone graciously as they came forward and congratulated her. Jack announced earlier to the audience of close friends and family, mainly consisting of the Irish, that Áine was his biological daughter, and he couldn't be prouder of her. All things considered, she took the news well.

Though I wasn't fooled by her easy acceptance. My instinct was telling me she'd fight me every step of the way. Besides, her parting words when we left Jack's office left no room for interpretation. She certainly had my attention.

"Why are you so gloomy?" Luciano stood next to me, sipping his favorite poison. Cognac. Jack ensured he had a special one just for Luciano.

"I'm not gloomy." I watched Áine shake hands with yet another man, with Jack by her side. It fucking burned me to see any man touching her. It was platonic, but I didn't give a shit. It made me want to cut off the hands of every man that dared touch that soft skin.

Maybe I'd start with Chad Stewart. Yeah, that would lift my spirits for sure. I disliked the prick. A burn radiated in my chest at the thought of him with my woman. I'd smash his pretty face and break every bone in his body if he ever looked her way again.

Sick motherfucker.

It was better if I didn't think about him right now. Otherwise, I might scare my future bride.

"How is Grace?" I asked Luciano to change the subject.

I could instantly sense Luciano's don't fuck with me posture ease.

"She's good. Another few months and the baby will be here." To say Luciano and Grace had a rough beginning was an understatement. I didn't expect him to bring her nor their son. If he could, he'd keep them all locked up. Just

like my brother-in-law. Luckily neither my sister nor Grace took any shit from their husbands. “I should probably give you a heads up.”

I cocked my eyebrow, waiting for him to continue. “Grace wants you to be the baby's godfather. You know I do too, but I was going to let her choose and she brought you up.”

That was unexpected, especially knowing what Benito put her through. A strong emotion swirled in my chest. My best friend’s wife trusted me with their unborn child. Fuck, was I turning into a softy?

I cleared my throat to ensure my voice wouldn’t reflect any emotions that currently invaded my heart. “I would be honored. Is she sure though?” I questioned him.

“She should pick me,” Luca chimed in, gulping his drink. “I’m better with children. Just ask my nieces. And soon, I’ll have more to spoil too.”

“Luca,” I groaned. “Fuck, brother. They wanted to tell everyone themselves.”

“Grace already knows,” Luciano chimed in. “Those two are doing research on nurseries and baby safe paint colors.”

“It will be a baby fest for the next few years,” Luca muttered. “I’ll go broke.”

All three of us chuckled. With Luca’s latest venture into the oil business, it would take him a hundred lifetimes of extravagant living to go broke.

I sensed Áine’s gaze on me. It burned through me, pulling my eyes in her direction.

“Cassio,” she greeted us with a light tilt to her gaze, like a queen greeting her subjects. Her voice was soft, and it soaked through my skin and straight to my groin. Jesus, I couldn’t wait to take her to bed again and have her as my own. But there was something else too.

A flicker of fear deep in my chest.

We all knew it wasn't good to love something too much in our world. And the fear of losing something you wanted so much was ingrained into me from an early age. After all, I had a perfect tormentor.

My father.

He liked to take it all away, starting with my mother. He was gone now but certain things weren't rational. When it came to Áine, the visceral need to protect her, keep her with me at all costs, overwhelmed me. A hunger to tie her to me forever roared in my chest and bled into my veins. I have waited for this for the past two years and now that the time was nearing, the need to make her mine fueled my obsession. Not to mention that her side gig was making me extra paranoid.

"Luciano," Jack greeted my best friend. "Áine, I'll let your husband introduce you."

Áine's head snapped his way and the words flew out. "He's not my husband," she gritted annoyedly.

I couldn't help but think back to Bianca's wedding day when my sister spat out those same words to Nico.

Callahan patted her hand affectionately. "I know. You did good, kiddo."

"Well, you know me," Luca tried to ease the situation. "You don't have to smile for me. I know you want to gouge my eyes out."

"Well, that's a relief," she replied in a dry tone. "At least I don't have to pretend then."

Her eyes darted to Luciano and recognition flickered in them. She remembered him from the nightclub two years ago. It wasn't as if Luciano was an easily forgettable guy.

"Áine, this is Luciano Vitale. A close friend."

She extended her hand. "Mr. Vitale, nice to see you again." Her tone said otherwise.

He chuckled. "Please call me Luciano. Mr. Vitale is my father."

Áine acknowledged him with a slight nod, but she kept her reserved posture.

“Wait. You’ve met him before?” Jack questioned.

Áine shrugged. “No, I didn’t meet him. I saw him a few years back in passing.”

The pointed look she shot our way told us all to keep our mouths shut. Lovely, another woman to boss us all around. Though, this one I’d keep and have by my side until death do us part.

Luciano must have gotten the message, because he replied, “Yeah, I can’t remember where exactly. A club maybe.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Not surprising. Margaret and Áine liked to party.” His daughter shot him an annoyed expression but said nothing. “How is your wife, Luciano?” Jack asked. “I hear you are expecting another child?”

I spotted Chad Stewart the moment he entered the room. I gritted my teeth and the entire room faded out except for *him*. The prick actually dared to show up here and the blood in my veins burned hotter. I itched to pull out my gun and shoot him, right here and now. Especially, considering the information I found out from Nico.

“She is doing well. Accusing me of feeding her too much.” I noted absentmindedly that Luciano answered Jack.

“Speaking about eating, I’m starving,” Áine muttered under her breath.

“Let’s eat then,” Luca announced. “After all, you are a guest of honor.”

Áine glared at him and opened her mouth to say something when she froze. I didn’t have to wonder who was the cause of it. Jack, Luciano, and my brother followed her gaze.

“Oh, the state’s attorney is here,” Luca announced the obvious. “I wonder if he’ll get shot tonight,” he muttered under his breath.

Chad spotted Áine and walked towards us. His eyes never wavered from my fiancée, his sleazy blonde hair heavy with gel and a fake smile across his face. If he thought I'd allow him anywhere near my woman, he was a bigger idiot than I thought.

"Mr. Callahan," Chad greeted him. "I must admit, I was surprised I wasn't invited. Friend of a friend mentioned there was an engagement party, and I couldn't resist coming. I hope you don't mind."

Yeah, I fucking minded.

"So why are you here?" I asked him. I signaled my men that stood right outside the ballroom. "I believe I told you once to stay away from her."

He reached for Áine's hand but before he could take it, I grabbed him by his wrist and twisted it so he couldn't move. "Don't touch my wife," I snarled.

I realized too late that I'd called her my wife. She wasn't yet. I waited for the correction to come, never moving my eyes away from the weasel. To my surprise, Áine didn't say a word.

Instead, the air stilled and everyone's eyes were on us, watching the scene.

"I can greet an old friend," the sleazebag tried to say, but his voice was too squeaky.

"No, you can't," I deadpanned. "Not unless you are ready to have your tongue cut out."

The blood in my veins burned me to think of what this fucker had worked up with Marco. I should just shoot him now and end him for good.

"Too many people," Luca muttered. He must have read my bloodthirsty thoughts.

So I'd have to be satisfied with throwing him out. My men came up, and when he tried to reach out for Áine's hand, I shoved him away.

"Take him out," I ordered my men. Chad's eyes fleeted towards Áine, as if expecting her to save him. "I can gouge

your eyeballs out too," I added in a menacing voice. "It would make my fucking day."

"Áine-" Chad attempted but didn't get to finish.

My men ushered him out in a not so gentle manner. I'd have to put security on Áine. I didn't trust Chad not to get his filthy paws on her. At least Marco didn't pretend to be a good guy. This one went around pretending he was better when in fact he was even worse.

Once he was gone, I turned to my future wife and found her face pale as death. She swallowed hard, then met my gaze.

"Are you crazy?" she rasped in a low voice.

"Maybe," I admitted. "But I don't tolerate men that use force on women and children."

"What do you mean by that, Cassio?" Jack inquired. After all, he preferred Chad Steward for his daughter, but it was only because he didn't know that weasel was as good as I did.

Her gaze flickered to her father then back to me. "He's the state's attorney. He helps victims," Áine defended him and the ugly jealousy slithered through my veins. "The King family uses force on women and children."

"Not all," Luca growled, taking a step towards her, but I held him back.

There were a few words I wanted to say myself but I pressed my lips tightly. This was neither the time nor place.

"Cassio?" Jack asked again.

"I'll send you information," I told him curtly. "I'll assign a guard for Áine." It was a moot point since she had one already. He didn't need to know that. "I know you have your own. I don't want Chad Stewart getting close to her."

Jack nodded and that was settled. A strangled laugh escaped Áine, her eyes darting between her father, Luciano, Luca, and myself.

"What? I don't get a say?" she challenged. "Would you like to decide when my bathroom breaks are?"

“You can decide on your own bathroom breaks,” I drawled. “But in the matter of Chad Stewart, no. You don’t have any say.” Her safety was non-negotiable to me.

She bit into her lip and narrowed her eyes on me. “Whatever you send in terms of information, Cassio King, I want it too.”

She strode away from me without a backward glance and her back stiff.

“Man, this marriage is going to be awesome,” Luciano shattered the silence. “Didn’t I tell you redheads are trouble, Cassio?”

I flipped him the bird. Callahan remained in his spot, his brow furrowed.

“What is this information, Cassio?” he inquired. “I don’t want Áine mixed up in anything dangerous.”

Callahan didn’t even realize she already was. Between the belles auction and running The Rose Rescue, she was in danger all the time. I would have to discuss The Rose Rescue with her, and if she needed help, I’d help her. But she wouldn’t be putting her life at risk like that.

“Our prestigious state’s attorney is working with Marco,” I told him. There was no need for elaboration. His expression darkened. “Callahan, he’s mine,” I growled in warning.

“You make it fucking fast, Cassio,” Jack gritted. “Otherwise, I’m finishing him.”

He walked away from us and headed straight for his wife. The word on the street was that he shared everything with her. I believed it, although it was slightly ironic that a woman who once supported a prime minister now supported the head of the Irish mafia.

I couldn’t blame him. Those images of the beaten girl were seared in my mind. I couldn’t even imagine the impact it had on her.

Ten minutes later, we finally sat down for a late formal dinner, being almost nine at night.

A little groan left her lips as her eyes searched out the waiter, realizing he was nowhere in sight. She sat straight, her lower lip between her teeth. It was as if she debated how to go about getting her food faster.

She looked beautiful, despite the fact that she still wore her business dress. The cream dress was elegant, but it showed off her figure perfectly. Strong and lean. And her hair. Jesus, even pulled up into a ponytail it reflected the lights, and it was like watching embers of fire dance around in her hair. Her slim arms and shoulders were at full display after she ditched her blazer that matched her dress. It wasn't exactly an engagement dinner dress, but how was she to know she'd be getting engaged?

I wouldn't have cared less if she wore jeans. I just wanted ***her***.

The ring on her finger fit just right. When I took her cold fingers into mine and slid the engagement ring onto it, she uttered with sarcasm that it was a good thing her and Margaret wore the same ring size. They didn't, but she didn't need to know that.

I flagged a waiter from the other side of the room.

"My fiancée is hungry," I told him. Áine stiffened at the title. "Ensure she gets her dinner first." Her ocean blue eyes snapped to me and a blush colored her cheeks. Before she had a chance to say anything else, I asked her, "What are you in the mood for?"

For a heartbeat of a second, I thought she'd argue with me but she must have been more hungry than eager to argue.

"Food," she muttered. "Anything. Just not liver. Yuck, not liver. But please don't take forever. I'm ready to chew on my arm."

Luca chuckled, hearing her words. "Hungry much?" Only the three of us were seated at our round table. Luciano headed back home. Missing his wife, no doubt. Margaret was supposed to be seated at our table too, but

she disappeared, which was fine by me; though I was surprised she didn't stick around for her cousin. Those two were close.

I watched my soon to be wife as she placed her order. Could this woman and I have a decent, happy marriage? My sister and Nico were finally at the point of happiness despite the rough beginning. At least that was how it looked. Bianca made it clear she appreciated Luca and my offer to eliminate her husband if he gave her grief, but she was keeping him. She loved him, and I was happy for both of them. Luciano and Grace found their middle ground and worked out their shit.

Fuck, I wanted the same. And Bianca's words of forcing my bride down the aisle rang in my ears. Truth was I didn't want to force Áine down the aisle, but I also didn't want to wait years.

"I didn't have much for lunch," Áine admitted reluctantly, once the waiter left our table.

"You should never skip a meal," Luca told her. "Never know when the next one is coming."

Irritation flashed across her face but she quickly hid it. "Hmmm-mm."

"So, you are an architect?" Luca inquired, trying to get her to talk. "Your father mentioned you are working on a big project."

She shrugged her one shoulder. "He thinks every project I work on is a big project." Then realizing she referred to Jack Callahan as her father, she continued, "And it's Jack. Just Jack."

"He's proud," I told her. It was true. The pride in Jack's eyes was hard to miss when he watched his daughter.

The day I carried her into the plane from the rescue mission seemed centuries ago; there was so much that happened since then. I had a suspicion about Jack being Áine's father from the moment I realized he wasn't using her to garner a favor with the prime minister. But it was his

actions that confirmed it. The way he watched Áine was his tell. There was pride, unconditional love, and devotion in his eyes each time he spoke to Áine. She and her mother were the most precious things in this world and he would give up everything for them. I was surprised nobody else could see the connection between father and daughter. It was so obvious, but everyone seemed oblivious to it for years.

That was fine by me. Their blindness was my gain. I stored that information along with the debt he owed me for the right time. The night Áine ran into me at my nightclub two years ago, I knew how I wanted Jack's repayment. In the form of his daughter.

"How is the designing project coming along?" I asked her, although I knew. I owned the company and she got that project by design. I trusted her to do the job, and I knew she loved that project from the little we talked about over text messages.

She was working on a skyrise project that would become a secured shelter for women that fell victim to sexual trafficking. It was befitting that she was working on a resolution that my father and brother Marco caused. The majority of human trafficking over last thirty years was initiated by the King family. Obviously, she knew that considering how much she hated them… us.

"It's going well," she replied without elaborating. It would seem Áine wouldn't be the type of woman to reveal it all or even volunteer information. At least not until we reached some middle ground. She might hold the grudge for a while because I omitted the full truth from her. "So what business are you two in? Export and import? On top of nightclubs, hotels, and casinos? That must be strenuous."

Ah, so she remembered all our conversations. Her last words held an undertone of sarcasm, her smile on her face revealing none of it. But the mocking was unmistakably there. It was obvious Callahan didn't apprise her of his own

business, so he certainly wouldn't educate his daughter on my businesses. But Áine was smart. If she figured out her father's business, she knew stuff about ours too. Besides, there was obviously dislike there. Her disgust and anger was unmistakable once she learned who I was.

"Something like that," I answered her, in a similar mocking tone.

The food arrived and she didn't bother waiting for us. Placing a napkin onto her lap, she dug right in.

Upon first bite, she closed her eyes and her expression was one of pure bliss. The moan that left Áine's lips went straight to my groin. Her little noises were what wet teenage dreams were made out of. I have waited too long for this, to make her mine. There was no reason to wait. I wanted Áine as my wife. Today!

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, the moment she chewed up her food and swallowed. Just as she swallowed my cum when she sucked me off in Vegas. Yeah, I had to get a grip. I firmly pushed inappropriate thoughts of my fiancée out of my mind. While my mind succeeded, my cock didn't quite cooperate. "This is so freaking good. And I'm so hungry."

My brother laughed. It was strange to hear him laugh twice now in a matter of minutes. He usually didn't laugh around strangers although she technically wasn't a stranger. "Don't apologize. It is nice to see a woman enjoy her food."

She just nodded and kept on eating. It was a good thing I kept a personal chef on my staff. He'd ensure she was fed her favorite dishes. Despite her slim build, she could eat. Then just as quickly she started, she was done.

"If I take one more bite," she grinned, "I'll explode. I'm done."

"No, you're not," I told her. "Didn't your mom teach you to finish your dinner?"

She rolled her eyes. "First, you won't be dictating any area of my life. So you better stop that before it goes too

far. And second, yes Mother tried *unsuccessfully* to force me to finish my dinner numerous times. And I spent many dinners sitting for hours bored out of my mind, because I couldn't stuff another bite into my mouth." She exhaled, her sigh content. "When I'm done, I'm done. It pretty much applies to every aspect of my life. Take note, Cassio King. So yes, no more food for me tonight."

Her little, or big, hint didn't escape me. It was another thing we had in common. Early rising to workout and giving people only one chance in life. I just hope I haven't blown my chance with her.

The buzzing of the phone sounded and all three of us glanced at our phones. Áine's eyebrows scrunched into a frown. She silenced her phone, but barely a second went by and her phone started buzzing again.

"Don't worry about us. If it's urgent, answer it," I offered.

With a nod, she quickly stood up and strode away from us and out into the hallway.

"She's stubborn," Luca muttered when she disappeared from our sight. "And probably used to getting her way."

Yes, probably.

"And so are you," he continued with sarcasm. "This should end well."

I took my glass of whiskey and downed it. Luca and his mouth would be the death of me.

"I mean look at Nico with our sister," he continued. Áine came back at that time and her head snapped to Luca. Inwardly, I groaned. I wished sometimes Luca would just keep his mouth shut.

"You have a sister?" she questioned, her delicate eyebrow furrowed and gaze darting between Luca and I. "I never saw any information on her."

I wasn't surprised to hear she looked us up. Thank fuck she didn't have someone with Nico's skills on her team. Otherwise, she'd be lethal.

“We just recently found out,” I told her. “Her mother kept her protected. I’d appreciate it if you don’t mention it yet. I don’t want anyone to get any ideas. She is married and her husband won’t take kindly to anyone threatening her and their children. And neither will we. I care a great deal about my family.”

Surprisingly, Áine nodded without hesitation. “I won’t say anything,” she promised while watching me pensively, as if she was cataloging every single thing she learned about me.

“Thank you,” I told her. I glanced at my watch and noted the time. “I have to get going. I’ll swing by your work tomorrow and we will have lunch.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Is that an order?”

My lip quirked up. “No.”

“Good. I’ll think about it.” Her eyes roamed the room and she spotted Margaret. “Well, have a good night you two.”

She stood up and walked away from us without a backward glance. It would seem all that was needed was my name and I got dismissed by Áine. How appropriate!

“Well, you two look like perfect love birds,” Luca muttered under his breath. “I bet she can’t live without you already.”

I stood up and pulled the sleeves of my suit jacket.

“Luca?”

“Yes?”

“Shut up.”

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

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ÁINE

The tension eased as the evening went on. My mind slowly started to reconcile Hunter and Cassio. The man I had been talking to over the last six weeks would surface every so often. In his attentiveness to my hunger. In his request to keep information about his sister private.

Holy shit. Benito King had a daughter. I was starting to see layers and layers of Cassio and Luca King. And I hated to admit it, but it made me question whether those brothers were anything like their father and brother Marco. I had to tread carefully.

As I made my way through the large ballroom, a few of the ladies stopped me and asked to see my engagement ring. I'd smile, my cheeks were hurting by now from all the smiling, and offer my hand with the ring.

I knew Cassio was still around; I could feel his eyes on me as I moved around the room, burning a hole into my back. It almost felt like he was guarding me. He seemed to be fiercely protective of what was his, and I had no doubt he now considered *me* his. The most disturbing part was that my body didn't mind it, though my mind was still debating. The earlier incident with Chad flashed in my mind when I practically tasted Cassio's fury in the air.

I spotted Margaret by the door, leading to the terrace and snuck up on her. “Are you avoiding me?” I whispered.

She whirled around. Our eyes met and the expression on her face confirmed my suspicion. I haven’t had a chance to talk to her the entire evening because she had been actively avoiding me.

“I’m sorry,” she spoke in a low voice so nobody could hear us.

“Don’t be,” I whispered. “I’m going to go home. Want a sleepover?”

“You still want to have sleepovers with me, even after what I’ve done?” Her eyes so similar to mine glimmered with regret.

“Of course,” I told her, taking her hand. “You are my best friend. No member of the King family will ever get between us.”

A tear trickled down her face, and I pulled her into my arms. “Stupid hormones,” she murmured, sniffling.

“I think it’s awesome I get to be an aunt,” I admitted softly.

“And we are blood related!” She pulled back, disbelief in her eyes. “I still can’t believe it; though I shouldn’t be surprised.”

I shrugged. This evening had gone unexpectedly, and I needed time to process it all. And learning that Jack Callahan was my father… Well, I’d need a while to process that revelation.

Margaret’s eyes traveled behind me, and I didn’t need to turn around to know who stood there. The back of my neck prickled and a burning sensation traveled down my spine. My body’s reaction to Cassio was the most peculiar thing I had ever experienced. Usually I felt repulsed with the need to put distance around men that weren’t family. But with him, there was none of it. From the moment I first ran into him in Temptation nightclub and then in Vegas, I felt

comfortable around him. In fact, deep down, I trusted him, which directly conflicted with my brain.

I wasn't quite sure if that was normal. Or good!

Slowly I turned around and my stomach tightened. He was too close. There was a foot of space between us, but I could almost feel his heat and the way I remembered his hard body pressing against mine. My heartbeat fluttered, and I almost put my hand over my heart at such a strong reaction.

"Cassio." I forced a smile onto my lips. "I thought you were leaving to take care of your business."

He gave me a knowing look and one side of his mouth tugged up into a half-smile. "I am leaving but not without a proper goodbye."

He took my hand into his and my heart fluttered. I stared in fascination as I watched in slow motion his tattooed hand bring mine to his lips. I shouldn't allow him to touch me, knowing he was Benito King's son. Yet, I did nothing to stop him. In fact, I craved his touch.

I stared at his mouth and warmth filled my stomach. His cool, dark expression locked on me, waiting for me to say something, but all I could do was stare in anticipation. Why wasn't my body kicking into freak-out mode with him? Now that I knew he was part of the King family, I should be repulsed. Yet, I wasn't.

His full lips were barely an inch from my knuckles and the tiniest flicker passed through his gaze. Was it a challenge? Or desire? His lips touched my skin and heat spread through my veins like an inferno.

It was even better than I remembered, and it was barely a touch. Soft, warm, and mind numbing. Every inch of my skin was on fire and the urge to pull my hand back with disgust never came. Even knowing his name. I craved to feel his lips again, to refresh my memory of their touch. I wanted him.

He feels safe, I realized.

He released my hand, and it almost felt like losing an anchor. His gaze sent a burning sensation through my bloodstream, and I wondered if he could see the strong impact he had on me.

I had so many questions, yet if he demanded to take me into a room right now, I feared I'd go. More than willingly.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Áine," Cassio said, telling me without words he wouldn't easily be dissuaded from the lunch date he set. It wasn't hard to guess that Cassio King got whatever he set his mind on and his mind was set to having lunch with me.

"Good night," I muttered.

Only fight the battles worth winning, Jack's voice echoed in my brain. I guess it was good that my stepfather… no, my father was a mobster and I had learned quite a number of things from him since my mother married him. He might not have involved me in any of his business but I learned a thing or two.

Each move I made and the words I uttered would be used wisely. With the purpose of sending the King empire crumbling to ashes. If Cassio and Luca were part of that empire, they would crumble.

If they weren't… Well, then I'd be married to Cassio King until death do us part. And somehow the thought didn't repulse me at all.

I watched his back as he walked away from me and I had to admit, it was as nice as his front. *Sexy back* shouted in my brain, along with the notes of the song of the same name, and I mentally facepalmed my forehead. At this rate, I would need Dr. Taylor for more than my nightmares.

Turning my attention back to my cousin, I found her looking at me. "What?" I asked a bit annoyed.

Her lips curved into a smile. "Nothing. I'm game for a sleepover."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, MARGARET AND I WALKED INTO THE lobby of my glass building in the heart of New York City. The entire building was made of windows. Two years ago, when I first walked by this building, I was impressed.

The second I walked into the lobby, I was awed, but once I entered the apartment, I decided I wanted to stay here forever. I loved my apartment and though I had no idea who owned the building, there were only a few tenants living here. We all knew each other, and though everyone was nice, we all kept to ourselves.

I had argued with Mom and Jack since my last year of college about moving out and living alone. No city, no neighborhood, no building was ever too safe.

Well, this one was. It was as if someone designed it just for me. The building security was tight, every glass window was bulletproof and visitors were screened. And when I say screened, I meant background check, go through a metal detector and all that crazy stuff. But it worked. Jack and Mom finally, although reluctantly, agreed to let me move out of their mansion.

“Hello Mr. Maurizio,” I greeted the doorman once in the lobby. As long as I lived here, there wasn’t a day that he didn’t work. He was older, about fifty, and very pleasant. His warm brown eyes and always ready smile made him appear very friendly although I was certain that he could be deadly too. He always wore a suit and a gun holster. In the beginning, I found it odd and slightly off putting, but I got used to it. Considering all the crime that happens in the city, it made sense that he would be armed.

“Miss Evans.” He tilted his head. “How are you this evening?”

I loved hearing his Italian accent. It was smooth and pleasant to the ear. I recalled the first time Jack and Mom

came to visit. Jack wasn't thrilled with the idea of me moving to start with, but once he heard Mr. Maurizio's accent, he was downright against it. It took my mother to calm him down.

"Good, thank you."

The owner of the building was private, and we never saw him, but he occupied the entire top floor of this building. My apartment was right below it. Ignoring the elevator, I strode to the staircase.

"Stairs again, I see," Margaret muttered behind me.

"Always," Mr. Maurizio and I answered at the same time, then shared a glance.

Climbing the stairs, two at the time, we got to my floor.

"You know," Margaret breathed heavily behind me. "I won't be able to climb the stairs when I'm round as a pumpkin."

I chuckled. She was right of course. I'd have to think of something. Or she'd take the elevator with the baby while I took the stairs. Whatever works. Once on my floor, I punched in the code and entered my little slice of heaven. It was always the same. The beauty of it was spellbinding. It felt like home, cozy and *mine*. Just mine. It was my sanctuary.

I crossed the hardwood floors towards the kitchen. On the opposite side of the living room stretched a glass wall with the views of the city. The views stunned me every single time, and I couldn't help flick a glance its way. The rush of the city was evident, and I knew it was loud but none of the city buzz could be heard here.

I strode to the kitchen with its granite countertops and professional grade appliances. Truthfully, with my work schedule and my little side business to eliminate trafficking, I barely had time for a domestic life. Though I enjoyed cooking very much.

The hardwood floor went through the entire apartment, including the three guest bedrooms and bathrooms. The

living room had a brick fireplace, giving it a cozy feeling. My furniture was mostly white with the exception of my bedroom that had mahogany wood that matched the hardwood but all the linen was white.

“Want some juice?” I asked Margaret as I poured myself a glass of white wine.

She groaned. “This is the first juice offering instead of wine.”

“But it’s for a good reason,” I offered with a smile. She took the glass of her juice as I sat next to her onto the couch. “What a night, huh?”

I still wasn’t sure how I felt about the family secret. It was one that should have never been kept from me. And why would my father… hmmm, Thomas, been alright with raising someone else’s child. It was unsettling, this latest discovery, and I wasn’t quite sure how to process it.

I took a sip of wine and finally felt myself starting to relax. This place was my zen, one of the only places I could actually relax and feel safe. Though not even my apartment kept nightmares at bay.

Margaret sipped on her juice, her look distant. The news of her pregnancy was a surprise. She always claimed children were not her thing. Yet, here we were.

“It’s all my fault,” Margaret muttered out of nowhere. “I got knocked up and now you have to pay the price.”

I tucked my legs underneath me, pulling two throw blankets from the armrest and offering one to her. It was mid-April and the nights were still chilly. I looked forward to the warmer weather, though the humidity in this city was nothing to crave.

“I’m so sorry,” Margaret added in a small voice.

“Don’t apologize.” It wasn’t right for either one of us to be forced to do this. Jack was crazy if he thought any of this was the right thing to do. Besides, I had a history with Hunter… ummm, Cassio. Damn it, not sure what I should call him!

“I was stupid and reckless. I got pregnant and now you-”

“Actually, it is their fault,” I retorted dryly. “Your uncle’s-” I winced at the title because it would take some time to get used to the fact that Callahan was my father. “Callahan’s and Cassio King’s. For making plans they had no right to make.”

Marrying Cassio should feel like a mistake. A grave mistake. People should marry for love, not forming alliances. And I’d be a fool not to admit that it bothered me that Cassio had an arrangement to marry Margaret. Yet he took me to bed. It bothered me ***a lot***. Though somewhere deep down, a part of me didn’t mind marrying him.

Did it make sense? Fuck no. Did it make sense I was a virgin until recently? Again, fuck no. But there it was and we’d deal with it. We could overcome anything and everything, except one thing. *Marco King*.

My phone beeped, startling me, and I quickly reached for it. My heart tripped seeing it was from Hunter and then leapt into my throat. All the years of terror and revulsion wiped just from a single text. It was scary how easily that guy impacted me.

I slid the message open and read it.

I want to talk to you.

My heart danced in my chest. Wonderful, this would be cute if I was still a teenager. But a grown-ass woman! Yeah, not so much.

I typed back. ***About???***

Despite myself, the corner of my lip tugged up. He’d know this was my moody response. After all, we’ve been texting long enough and he picked up on my little traits. The shorter the text, the worse my mood.

Two years ago, Vegas, marriage, us. Take a pick.

Okay, so he was right. We should talk. Go into this *arrangement* clear headed. After all, the wedding was barely three days away. I couldn’t understand the rush. The

engagement announcement and the wedding - both in the same week.

Despite this crazy way that my body reacted to him, I knew I needed my reason and common sense back. You just didn't marry the son of the man that killed your father. Yes, Benito was dead, but the trafficking business didn't end with his death. Regardless of how handsome Cassio was or how good he could make me feel. But… yes, there was always a but. The phone conversation kept jumping to the forefront of my mind. If his words were any indication, he didn't care for his father and carried a guilt for the hurt he caused.

And we couldn't discount that the sex with Hunter was amazing. No, I didn't have any other experience to compare it to, but even that aside, the way he ensured my pleasure, the way he read my body even before I knew what it was saying. Hunter was perfect for me in that regard.

Hunter. Cassio. Cassio Hunter King.

Somehow the name suited him.

"Is everything okay?" Margaret's voice startled me. I got so lost in my thoughts that I forgot she was here. That was how much that man rattled me.

"Yeah, everything is good," I told her quickly and typed up a message back.

Tomorrow. You demanded lunch. Make the best of it.

I would go along with the charade of marriage, bring down the King trafficking business, and have a shit ton of sex. I'd have no issues in that department with Cassio King.

Great, it was set then.

Two for one. *Look at me multitasking*, I thought wryly. I just needed cheerleaders behind me. Give me an A… the rhyming chant played in my mind.

With my decision made, I returned attention to my cousin.

“You can’t help out with the agency anymore,” I told her. “You have to take care of yourself and the baby.”

Her shoulders squared and she sat up abruptly, agitation written all over her face. “I’m not an invalid.”

“I know. But we both know you can’t be fighting in your condition. It’s not safe for you nor the baby.” I smiled to lighten the blow. “I can’t wait to spoil my niece or nephew.”

She rubbed her hand over her flat belly, then her eyes came to mine. Margaret knew it wasn’t possible. She just didn’t like being told what to do. Her gaze came up to mine.

“You are not going to ask me?” Our eyes locked. I knew what she was asking. She expected me to ask who the father of the baby was. I didn’t want her to feel obligated to tell me. Certain things were personal and baby daddy was certainly personal. Otherwise, she would have told me.

“No,” I answered.

“You don’t want to know?”

I raised my eyebrow. “Do you want to tell?”

A heavy sigh left her lips. “I want to tell you because I feel guilty.”

I shrugged. “Don’t tell me who the father is. Probably better you keep it a secret for now, so Jack doesn’t kill the poor guy.” I knew the same thought crossed her mind. She was not only protecting her baby but also the baby’s father. Besides, maybe I was easing my own conscience too. I slept with Margaret’s fiancé. Although unknowingly. It didn’t do anything to ease the guilt.

“Áine, the truth is,” she started in a small voice, “I don’t know who the father is.”

I scrunched my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

She pushed both her hands through her thick dark mane. “I went to a masked party I heard about while we were in Vegas. I hooked up with a guy there. He was wearing a mask the entire time.” My mouth parted in

shock. It wasn’t what I expected. I thought she was protecting the father. “I have no clue who the father is.”

“Oh.”

Well, fuck! Though I wouldn’t judge her. The baby would be loved by everyone. Margaret’s brothers, myself, my parents. We’d all spoil the baby.

She covered her face in shame and I immediately leaned forward. “Hey,” I murmured, peeling them off.

“I’m so ashamed,” she grumbled.

“Don’t you dare,” I told her. “There is nothing to be ashamed of. Did you hurt anyone? No, you didn’t.” I hugged her. “You’ll be a wonderful mother. And we’ll spoil that baby in the best way possible. Father or no father. You and that baby *will* be happy. You have every right to be happy!”

“And you don’t?” she challenged me, sniffling. “You should be marrying for love and happiness too.”

I thought back to Cassio King. Two years ago, I was fascinated with the fact that a man’s touch didn’t send me into a spiraling panic. The moment our eyes connected, he appealed to me. But then when we connected in Vegas and over the last six weeks, I actually felt happy. Hopeful. Connected to him. While the rational part of me told me it was barely a relationship, the irrational one, that usually didn’t make an appearance, told me to be all in.

Just the memory of his lips against my skin sent my heart into overdrive. The panic that I’d grown accustomed to was nowhere to be found when I was around that man. I craved his touch like the air I breathed. Just an innocent brush of his warm lips against my knuckles and I lost sense of place and time. Somehow it felt critical that I keep this feeling. Keep Hunter close to me for that feeling of normalcy.

The long, celibate slumber my body had been in for a long time has finally ended. Thanks to Cassio Hunter King. So I owed it to him to at least hear him out.

“I was thinking,” I said, changing the subject, “… if I marry Cassio, I could take down their empire from the inside.” Her eyes widened and before she could say anything else, I continued, “What better way to get information and stop all the trafficking by them?”

“But you’ll be shackled to him,” she whispered in a low voice. “You’ll have to sleep with him.”

My fingers twisted around my wrist, a dull pain throbbing in it. A memory of my broken wrist with a tattooed hand wrapped around it flashed in my mind, but it disappeared as fast as it came. These scrambled images increased over the last month and were killing me.

I never broke my wrist, I thought back. I never broke any bones. None of the flashbacks of images that kept appearing made sense.

“Áine?” Margaret called out and our eyes met. “Will you be okay sleeping with him?”

More than okay, I thought wryly.

Jesus, I practically had to hold myself back from shouting *Yeehaw, sign me up*. Guilt hit me almost immediately. She was worrying about me. She knew I didn’t do casual sex. What she didn’t know was that I didn’t do sex at all. Until six week ago in Vegas. With our very own Cassio Hunter King.

“Maggie, I have a confession to make as well,” I muttered softly. I couldn’t keep lying to her while she worried about me. Besides, she made her confession. It made me a coward to keep lying to her.

Our eyes connected. “Remember Vegas?”

She rolled her eyes. “Do I ever! Did you not hear my admission?”

I smiled.

“That evening you disappeared on me,” I started hesitantly, unsure how she’d take the news. “I ran into Hunter.” She waited, her eyes wide. She suspected what was coming. “I- I… ummm…”

“Just spit it out, Áine!”

“I slept with him,” I admitted guiltily. “I didn’t know he was yours. I wouldn’t have-”

I cut myself off because for the first time in my life, I wasn’t certain if those words were true. From the moment we met, the attraction to that man kindled, like a blaze bright and strong. He felt right; like he should be mine. His last name aside, his family aside… I felt connected to him. I felt like an indecisive teenager with her first love.

“Áine, he was never mine,” Maggie’s protest came out firm and strong. “And the way he looked at you in the elevator. I was shocked to hear he arranged to marry me. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were his end game all along.”

I frowned. His end game. I just hoped it was in the good sense, and we wouldn’t kill each other in the process.

“You liked sleeping with him?” she questioned mischievously and instantly the tension was out the window. “Is he good in bed? And does he have tattoos all over?”

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop the grin from spreading and instead rolled my eyes, as if I was annoyed. But she knew me too well. Playfully she pushed me gently against my shoulder and we both burst into a fit of giggles.

“Okay, okay, all seriousness aside,” Maggie said, straightening up. “What if he and his brother are working with Marco? Or tries to hurt you?”

I shrugged. My instinct told me Cassio wasn’t the type to hurt women. Or to force himself on one. My experience from Vegas was proof of that, though there were many unanswered questions. Besides, I could protect myself just fine, thanks to combat training I had been receiving since I took over The Rose Rescue. “If we bring all King trafficking to a halt, it’d be worth it.”

And I was up for the challenge.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

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CASSIO

The headquarters of HC Architecture was a plain, steel building, and it was exactly that which made it stand out from other buildings in downtown New York. I have owned it for the past two years. Thanks to Nico's magic, not too many people, outside my closest friends and my brother, knew I owned it. I intended to keep it that way.

Some people would consider my obsession with Áine going overboard, but I didn't give a shit. I kept a close eye on Áine ever since our paths crossed two years ago. I bought the company she worked at, and when she searched for an apartment in the city, I ensured she heard about the availability in my building. It offered the most protection.

"Mr. DiMauro," I was greeted by the receptionist. She offered me a big smile, smiling seductively. It was the name I used when transacting any meetings here. "I heard you'd be here. I hope you will stay a while." Her brown eyes were bright with unspoken invitation as she swiped her tongue over her lower lip.

My lips curved, though it wasn't a smile.

"Miss Evan's office," I told her.

The glass wall with HC Architecture logo stretched over the back wall with water cascading down both sides. It

flowed down in waves and ripped over the logo causing a beautiful effect.

“I can take you-” she offered, but I immediately stopped her.

“Which floor?” I ignored her attempts.

She came around the reception desk and got too close. “I can walk you to her office.”

She smiled wide and leaned closer. I was half tempted to bark an order at her to get back to her position, but she wasn’t really worth me getting riled up. I was here to talk to Áine. I wouldn’t be playing games with my soon-to-be wife and have us tiptoe around each other.

As for this receptionist, I’d have someone get rid of her. It was bad form to have our front desk flirt with guests.

“No, thank you,” I told her. “But I would like my personal space back.”

Her brows creased in confusion. It couldn’t possibly be the first time she was rejected. Thankfully, she took a step back.

“Cassio?” A familiar soft voice came behind me.

I turned in its direction and Áine stood there, watching me in surprise. I told her we’d have lunch; I guess she didn’t expect me to follow up. She wore a white, sleeveless blouse with light pink neckline, navy skirt that came to her knees and nude heels. She looked sexy and professional. A navy blazer and a large folder were both in her hands along with a laptop.

“Hello, Áine.” I leaned over and pressed a kiss on her cheek.

“What are you doing here?” she questioned, glancing around. Who else was she expecting?

“We are having lunch,” I told her. “Or did my fiancée forget already?”

I noticed her hand free of the engagement ring and something about it irked me. I wanted to brand her so the

whole world knew she was mine. After all, I'd waited long enough.

She put her folder that looked to contain drawings and her laptop on the receptionist counter. The latter observed our interaction with interest, probably eager for gossip.

"Of course not." Áine pasted on a fake smile, and I took the navy blazer from her, then helped her put it on. Plus it allowed me to put my hands on her and get closer to her. "That's why I'm here," she added.

I knew without a doubt it was not. Once her blazer was on, she grabbed her stuff, then glanced my way.

"So where to, my dear fiancé?" she asked, her tone full of sarcasm.

I slid my hand to her lower back and urged her forward. Her back slightly stiffened for a faction of a second, but she didn't pull away. We walked out of the building and fresh, cool air hit us.

Leaning over, I whispered in her ear, "Where is your engagement ring?"

Her eyes darted down to her finger, and then back to me.

"Crap," she muttered. "I don't sleep with jewelry and I just… Well, I forgot the ring."

My lips tugged up into a smile. I believed her. Put a quarter million dollar ring on another woman, she'd claw your eyes out if you attempted to take it.

"Maybe we should tattoo the wedding ring on your finger when we get married."

She rolled her eyes. "Tattoos are very permanent," she replied, then glanced at my free hand, studying it. Her step halted and we stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Her brows drawn tight, she kept staring at my tattoo. "I'd swear it is the same exact tattoo," she muttered under her breath. I knew she was referring to her dream. Well, a memory that plagued her in her dreams. "I saw it a long time ago," she

whispered, her gaze locked on them. “I swear it is right there and-”

But whatever she was going to say remain unsaid. She shook her head, a quick, small movement like she remembered something she didn’t understand. Was her memory coming back?

“Anyhow, no tattoos for me,” she finally said, her deep ocean pools meeting my eyes.

“Then a ring is a must,” I told her. “I don’t want any misunderstandings by others that you are available.”

“Don’t trust me, huh?” she challenged me.

Instead of answering her, I turned it back to her. “Do you trust me?”

She chose not to answer but held my gaze. I didn’t have to worry about Áine cowering before me, or bending to my will. She was strong to stand her ground.

“This is my car,” I finally told her, nudging her towards my McLaren.

“Where are we having lunch?”

“My favorite place,” I told her, opening the door for her.

“Well, that tells me everything.” Rolling her eyes, she slid into the seat.

It took us five minutes to get there. We spent the drive in silence, and once there, I parked the car in the gated parking area, then headed down the street. The sounds of the cars honking in the distance filled the air.

“I hope you like Italian food.” I glanced over and her lips curved into a soft smile.

“I do.”

We walked into a small corner restaurant, and I watched Áine looking around in surprise. This place wasn’t a luxury restaurant. The walls were decorated with the old, faded paper with images of ancient Italy. There were only ten tables and they were close together.

“Don’t like it?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that. I just expected-” She cut herself off.

“Something fancy?”

She chuckled softly. “Yes, I guess.”

“Do you want us to go somewhere fancier?” I asked her. It didn’t matter to me, but this place was one of the rare places in New York City I had memories tied to. Happy memories.

“No,” she answered quickly. “This is perfectly fine.”

I smiled. “This place has the best brick oven pizza in the city. A real Italian pizza.”

“Good, because I’m starving,” she admitted.

“Follow me then.”

I led her to the far wall with a table for two. Pulling out the chair for her, she murmured her thanks. I sat myself down and our eyes met. Each time her deep blue eyes met mine, I got that familiar squeezing feeling in my chest. I started to associate it only with her.

“You come here often?” she asked curiously.

“It’s been a while,” I told her. “When my brother and I were little, and while my mother was still alive, she’d bring us here all the time. It was her sanctuary away from my father. Over the last ten years or so, occasionally, Luca and I would swing by.”

Áine tilted her head pensively, listening attentively.

“Do you miss her?”

“Yes.” It felt good sitting with her here. Comforting. “Certain things are harder to get over than others.”

She nodded in understanding. I knew she understood it, though her memory was fractured. Deep down she knew what I meant. “Dad has been gone a while and there are still certain things I miss about him. His belly laugh; or his snarky remarks.”

I nodded. Yes, she understood it well.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” she murmured, compassion in her ocean blue eyes.

“It was a long time ago.” This lunch wasn’t supposed to be about gloomy memories but for the two of us to get to know each other. And come clean about certain things.

“I’m sure it still hurts,” she spoke softly. The look in her eyes was cautious, tentative. “Like you said, certain things are hard to overcome.”

She spoke about her own experiences. With Nico’s help, I got a look into Áine’s medical history. She underwent hypnotherapy therapy after her kidnapping. According to the reports, it helped her suppress the bad memories associated with what happened. It only dampened her memories, causing her to have regular sessions to keep them from returning. It was the reason for her frequent visits to Dr. Taylor.

I could just kill Callahan and her mother for subjecting Áine to it. Her mother should have known suppressing her memories was risky. It made her more vulnerable.

“Yes, they are.”

“Cassio, is that really you?” A voice stopped our discussion and I stood up. Maria, my mother’s oldest friend, approached us from the kitchen area. “It is so good to see you.”

“Hello, Maria,” I greeted her and pulled the older woman into a hug. She had a big smile on her face, as she always did when she’d see my brother and me. She pulled back and her eyes darted to Áine.

“Maria, this is my fiancée,” I introduced the two. “Áine Callahan.”

Her hand came to her mouth, her eyes widening. “You are getting married?” she exclaimed.

“I am.”

Maria looked like she got the news of the century. She beamed, her eyes shining with excitement.

“So nice to meet you.” Áine stood up and extended her hand to Maria and the latter pulled her into a tight hug.

“And you! You are so beautiful,” Maria exclaimed. “You’ll be good for our Cassio.”

Áine awkwardly patted Maria’s back, her eyes darting to me like she was begging me to help her with the awkwardness. It was almost comical. Maria just liked to hug. “Umm, thank you,” she murmured.

Maria’s eyes warmed and she let poor Áine go, then hugged me again with tears in her eyes. “Oh, Cassio. Your mamma would be so happy and proud. And your nonno!”

A little pang hit my chest at the mention of my mother, but I quickly shoved it somewhere deep. It would seem only my mother and Áine were capable of hitting me right deep into my chest.

“I hope you’ll come,” I told Maria, and the second the words left my lips, her hands came to her chest.

“You want me to come?”

“Of course,” I said. “You and Angelo. I’ll have one of my men pick you up if you agree to come.”

“Sì, sì.” She clapped her hands. “Is that ok, Áine? We’ve known Cassio since he was born.”

“Of course,” Áine answered and she actually sounded sincere. Maybe she came to terms with this marriage after getting some sleep.

After a few more words were exchanged, Maria disappeared into the kitchen and I sat back down.

“She’s very nice,” Áine commented once she was gone.

I leaned back in my chair, extending my legs. “She was my mother’s best friend.” My eyes darted to the kitchen where Maria disappeared to. “My grandfather in Sicily wanted my mother to get her education in the States. So he sent her to New York. She was homesick and luckily Maria was from Sicily too so the two connected. The rest is history.”

“Somehow I have a feeling there is a lot more to that story.” Áine’s clear eyes watched me. She was right, there was more to that story. My mother met my father, fell in

love, and had two children out of wedlock. Much to Nonno's dismay.

Our father was cruel to our mother and eventually she broke. Instead of reaching out to my grandfather, seeking help, she sought her escape in suicide, leaving Luca and I in Benito's clutches.

Our father used savagery to prepare me to rule his kingdom. To torture and mold us into his killers until he no longer needed us or wanted us. At least that was the fucking excuse he used. The truth was, he was scared of our blood ties to the DiMauro family in Sicily. He fucked with our mind, trying to make us weaker. He didn't want us to become bigger and better than him, and he was willing to sacrifice his own sons if it meant more power.

He never counted on a daughter though. He never saw her coming, misjudged her hate. He misjudged all of our hate. Her mother committed suicide, but he handed her the rope. My mother committed suicide, but it was Benito that pushed her into it.

The bottom line was that motherfucker left a stain on all of our souls. Bianca's, Luca's, mine. Even Marco's, though that fucker was beyond saving. He had gone off the deep end a long time ago.

Not a moment too soon, a large pizza was delivered to our table. The topic of my father wasn't a welcomed one.

"Hope this is enough." I changed the subject to food at hand.

Áine's eyes bulged. "Jesus, all this?"

"You said you are hungry."

"Yes, but for two slices tops. I hope you brought your appetite," she joked, glancing my way.

"I have. Luca eats one of these all by himself."

She chuckled. "Why am I not surprised?"

I had to admit, this lunch date was going even better than I hoped for. Áine was easy to talk to, and I learned from Nonno that it was a key to making a marriage work. It

was only thanks to him that Luca and I didn’t turn into total detached sociopaths, like Marco.

My phone buzzed and I checked the message. It was from Nico. He and Bianca were coming tomorrow. I wanted to introduce them all to Áine before the wedding. After all, they were family.

“Everything okay?” she asked and I set my phone aside.

“Yes, my sister and her family are coming to New York tomorrow,” I told her. For a fraction of a second, I debated whether I should tell her who my sister was but decided against it. I didn’t want Áine to think Bianca was any different from when she knew her before. “I want you to meet them over dinner. Your parents too, of course. Her girls will like you.”

“The girls?”

“Her twin daughters. They are quite something.”

“Hmmm.”

“Hannah will try to get your jewelry out of you,” I warned her. “Better keep your engagement ring glued to your finger. And Arianna will cover for her while her sister is robbing you.”

Áine’s warm laughter rang through the little restaurant and the sound of it warmed my chest.

“Little thieves, huh?”

I smiled at her accurate description. “They like shiny stuff and unfortunately have very expensive taste. Luca is not helping the matter since he keeps indulging them.”

“Well, I look forward to meeting them too.”

Our lunch turned out very pleasant. Áine had an easy, calm personality and underneath it all, she was warm with a great sense of humor. She kept her guard up, but I didn’t blame her. It was probably her instinct warning her, assigning my father’s attributes on me.

Except, I was nothing like my father. She couldn’t remember that Luca and I came to save her from that hellhole my father and brother kept her caged in. But

despite her brain warning her, she trusted me. And there was no denying the attraction that sizzled between us.

I watched her with other men or people in general. She didn't like physical closeness and something recoiled her from men's touches. But not from mine. No matter how much she'd deny it, she trusted me.

And I'd never break that trust.

Which led me to the topic we had to discuss. "I want to be honest with you," I started, her eyes studying me curiously. "I never had any intention of marrying your cousin."

Her soft gasp told me she believed I schemed her into my bed while knowing all along I'd marry her cousin. Not the best kind of confidence.

"Then why the pretense?" she inquired. She was careful to trust my word.

"First, Callahan would have never agreed to marriage with you," I told her honestly. "Not unless his hand was forced. Trust me on that."

She cocked her eyebrow. "Well, maybe neither one of you two should be arranging marriages without discussing it with the intended target first."

Good, she wasn't screaming. Not that I expected her to. Áine was a reasonable woman and had a good head on her shoulders.

"Point taken," I admitted, though it wasn't that simple in the underworld. "With Benito alive and all the havoc he was causing, I couldn't afford to go against Jack and start a war with him while fighting Benito and Marco."

"Two years ago?"

I took her hand into mine and despite our obvious disparities, we fit. Her eyes lowered and she watched the ink on my hand. She seemed fascinated with the rose tattoo, the crease between her brows deepening each time she glanced at it. The rose was my mother's favorite flower. It reminded her of home and Nonno, but she was too

ashamed to go back to him, to ask for protection, and it cost her everything.

“Yes, two years ago,” I said softly. “I wanted to keep you two years ago. The Wonder Woman that slammed into my life, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.”

Her mouth parted and light blush colored her cheeks. “Well, that’s…”

She searched for a word and failed to come up with one. She was right; it was slightly overboard. I wanted Áine as my wife and no replacement would do. It was her or nobody else.

Did I scheme to get her? Yes. Was I sorry? Fuck, no.

“Did you plan Vegas?” Her question didn’t surprise me.

“No,” I told her. “I planned on running into you, to see if you still remembered me. That was it.”

Well, there was one other thing, but it wasn’t time to admit to that one. She probably wouldn’t take kindly to me setting her cousin up to get seduced by another man.

“That’s a bit intense, Hunter,” she murmured. I noted she reverted back to the name I gave her in Vegas. Somehow it felt right on her lips, to use the name that was rarely used by anyone else. “Your family deals with human trafficking.”

“Luca and I are not my father,” I told her firmly, reminding her of her own words. “Neither is our sister. We fight human trafficking, alongside friends and our own family, which doesn’t include Marco. Nor did it include Benito when he was still alive.”

She tilted her head as if deciding to believe me or not. It was time I admitted I knew about her extra-curricular activities. Very soon.

“And I should just believe your word?”

“Yes, because I will never lie to you,” I told her. “I might not tell you everything, but I won’t lie to you.”

Silence washed over both of us, filling the space between us along with my vow. I meant it when I said I

wouldn’t lie to her. She’d be my equal in this marriage. I wouldn’t pull her into the illegal side of my business, but she’d be my partner in everything else.

“Did you have a tail on me? Is that how you knew I was in Turkey?” The statement she blurted came out of nowhere.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because your safety is my top priority.”

“You said Benito retaliated in more than one way. What does that mean exactly?” I wondered how much was told to her, considering her memories.

“Why do you see Dr. Taylor?” It would seem we’d have this conversation sooner versus later.

Surprise flashed in her eyes, combined with a suspicion. “How do you know about that?”

“I looked you up,” I told her. “I needed to know why you couldn’t remember me.”

When Luca and I went back to that hellhole after saving Áine, we’d taken special care to learn every man that dared lay a finger on her during her captivity. Luca and I had a long list of sins to pay for. A few more didn’t make a difference. And those men didn’t deserve anything better - for what they did to Áine and the rest of the women there.

Áine kept those memories closed in a box and refused to set them free, but I sensed her mind revolting. She’d have to face those memories sooner or later and we’d deal with it together. She was strong. Nobody and nothing would hold her down.

Least of all my brother Marco. He was the last man still breathing who dared to torture Áine. But his time was coming too.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

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ÁINE

"I looked you up," he told me. "I needed to know why you couldn't remember me."

There it was! Admission that I had met him before.

My eyes immediately darted to his hand that still covered mine. The images of the hand reaching through the fog flashed through my mind. With the same tattoo.

The throbbing in my temple increased, but I ignored it. I had to remember it. It was important; I knew it was. The harder I tried the worse the headache became. My eyes misted from intense pain, but I was unwilling to let go until firm fingers took my chin, forcing me to look at him.

"Don't force it," he instructed softly.

I blinked, drowning in his dark gaze and through the fog a clear memory surfaced.

"We are here to help you." The voice was Hunter's. *"I'm Cassio. This is my brother Luca."* There were dirty walls everywhere, screams in the distance. All I felt was fear in the pit of my stomach. And hope, staring into this man's dark eyes full of compassion. *"Callahan sent us."*

I blinked again and swallowed hard, while my heart thundered under my rib cage.

"Holy shit," I muttered. "You and Luca. I met you both. Jack sent you to get me." I shook my head, memories

incoherent. “Where was I?”

“Turkey.” I opened my mouth to ask the next question, when he stopped me. “You have to remember on your own. I’ll help you along.”

This was unreal. I thought him my enemy less than twenty-four hours ago, and now he was unraveling the images that lurked in my mind. Something settled deep inside my chest and it would remain. I knew it as well as my own heartbeat.

“Thank you,” I told him softly.

He’d never know how much that piece of memory meant to me. I had questions, now more than ever, but I also felt like a tiny piece of me was put back where it belonged all along.

“No more Dr. Taylor,” he said, his voice unnegotiable.

“But she helps with my headaches,” I retorted. Those migraines could get very bad, and I was already overdue for a visit.

“You need to remember,” he stated firmly. “Once you remember it all, it will all make sense.”

I had a feeling there was a lot to remember. And truthfully, part of me was scared.

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Chapter Thirty

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CASSIO

A flicker of fear passed over her expression and the pale blue vein in her neck beat quickly. But then she steeled herself and nodded. She'd deal with it. My little butterfly was strong.

It was her strength that hit me in the chest when we found her eleven years ago. A little bruised girl with haunted ghosts lurking in her eyes still had her strength in her soul. She might have not seen it but I did. And just like a butterfly, she emerged from the young girl into the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. A woman that had my heart and my soul.

Our encounter two years ago sealed the deal. I craved to learn every single inch of her, every freckle on her creamy skin. I longed to run my finger down every curve of her body and mold her into me. The way she fit against me, the sweet scent of her. It had all been tattooed into my flesh and my brain.

This woman was mine. Anyone who threatened her, threatened me. Anyone who touched her, touched me. And I didn't take kindly to people touching what was mine.

"Okay, no more Dr. Taylor," she answered. "Though Mom and Jack won't be happy."

"I'll deal with them."

Her lips curved into a smile. “I bet you’d like that.”

I grinned. I actually liked her mother and Jack. They did what they thought best for Áine, but she’d be my wife in a few days. She was my responsibility now. And this woman was strong. It was time she remembered what happened, so she couldn’t be blindsided.

The hour with Áine passed way too quickly.

She glanced at her watch and squealed in a small voice, jumping up.

“Crap,” she exclaimed. “Look at the time. I have to drop off my drawings across the city. Otherwise, I’m going to lose my job.”

There was no chance in hell she’d ever lose her job. She’d run that company eventually. Unless she wanted to raise our children. Damn it, something about the idea of having children with this woman had me rattled in the best possible way.

I stood up, helping her put on the jacket. “Just give me the address and I’ll take you.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“It is,” I insisted. “I’ll take you.”

Her shoulders tensed and she glared at me. “I said that is not necessary, Cassio. I’m doing this one alone.”

Annoyance burned through me. There weren’t too many people that stood up to me, but somehow it didn’t surprise me that Áine would be one of them. Besides, now that she was within my reach, I didn’t want anything happening that would jeopardize our wedding.

My men were still out there looking for Chad Steward, the fucking weasel disappeared. Just like the rat that he was, he went into hiding.

“Which side of town?”

Our gazes locked and we stared at each other in battle of our wills. Her lips pressed into a thin line and I knew she gave in.

“Brooklyn,” she gritted out. “I’m taking a cab. Alone.”

Stubborn woman.

“I’ll make sure you get into a cab safely.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t object. If she knew I had men tailing her, she’d be even more pissed off. There was no chance in hell that I’d risk her safety.

We walked out of the restaurant together, strode to my car to get her bag of drawings and then I flagged a cab.

The moment it stopped, she took a step to get into it, but I wrapped my hand around her upper arm.

“Wait,” I warned her.

She gave me a look like I was crazy but she did as I ordered. *Good, we are kicking this off to a great start,* I thought wryly.

I opened the door to the cab, but before I’d let Áine get inside, I read the cab driver's credentials and took a photo of it.

“What are you doing?” he protested.

“The lady needs a ride to Brooklyn,” I told him. “Anything happens to her and I’ll find you. There is no corner on this Earth you can hide from me. Understood?”

He paled a few shades but nodded. “Good.”

She must have heard what I told the driver because she glared at me and shook her head. I was quite sure she murmured *psycho* under her breath.

I took her wrist and pulled her closer to me. Instantly her body melted against mine and satisfaction washed over me. Our mouths locked, the taste of her warm and inviting. I’d never get enough of her. Our tongues moved in rhythm and a low moan vibrated from her. I knew this was neither the time nor place and pulling away was the hardest thing I had to do in a while.

Her lashes fluttered open to reveal her lustful eyes. She leaned in as if pulled by a magnetic force. Good, maybe she felt this thing between us as intensely as I did.

Pressing another kiss onto her soft cheek, I stepped aside and demonstrated with my hand for Áine to get in.

Frustrated, her cheeks burned. “I want more.”

I fucking loved her unreserved way when it came to sex.

I pressed a kiss on the tip of her nose. “I’ll see you.”

Instead of answering me, she slammed the cab door in my face.

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Chapter Thirty-One

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ÁINE

It has been a whole day since I had my lunch with Cassio. Surprisingly, it was pleasant and arousing. That kiss before he sent me off just about melted me from the inside. Then as I sat in the cab, I remembered he went all mobster on the poor cab driver. The guy was scared to even look at me after Cassio's threat. *Freaking psychopath!*

But an incredibly gorgeous one.

I seemed to like everything about him. His soulful eyes, his demeanor, his honesty, his protectiveness, his kisses. Geez, it would seem I totally swooned. And I looked forward to seeing him again. To smell his scent. Feel his heat.

My mind refused to settle last night. I played the conversation with Cassio over and over in my mind. The shock of his revelation. The nightmares. The terrifying images. They were all memories. The meaning of the flashbacks terrified me, but I couldn't feign ignorance. Cassio was right; I had to remember it on my own.

"Hello, Connor," I greeted Jack's man as I entered the house. It has been a while since I came to dinner twice in the same week.

Jack and Cassio thought it was a great idea to have an early family dinner tonight, so we could all get to know

each other. Of course, Luca would be there. Cassio's sister and her family were coming too. I couldn't help but think it would be an interesting, uncomfortable dinner.

I kind of wished I'd asked Cassio if the two of us could have dinner alone. I had so many questions. Now I was positive the hand in my dreams, reaching out to me, was his.

"Miss," Connor greeted me back. "You look nice."

I smiled at his compliment. I wore a light blue dress with white polka dots and quarter sleeves. Cassio said it would be a casual dinner so I combined the dress with white flats. I opted to leave my hair down.

"Thank you but-" I have tried to keep him from calling me Miss for years.

"I know, I know. No titles." He grinned, amusement in his eyes. "Everyone is in the dining room."

Shaking my head, I rushed through the hallway. I arrived late, since it was already four and I should have been here by three-thirty, and as I turned a corner, I ran right into Margaret.

"Thank God! You are finally here," she whispered, wrapping her arms around me.

"Did something happen?" I questioned her, my eyes darting over her. It seemed quiet, nobody arguing.

"No, but it is so damn uncomfortable," she muttered. "The tension. Uncle Jack keeps glaring at me. Your mom is trying to be a perfect hostess, eyeing Morrelli like he will kill us any minute."

I scoffed. "Nobody is killing anyone."

She glanced around before she continued in a hushed voice. "Nico Morrelli is ruthless. A few years ago, he hunted men that were rumored to have been connected to an attack on his sister." I listened intently. I hadn't heard anything about that. Not that I would have since I didn't keep up with underworld activities. Jack did a good job keeping me out of all of it. "He tortured them and then cut

them up and spread their parts to ensure their families couldn't bury them."

I tilted my head. "Well, if they hurt his sister, they kind of deserved it."

Margaret's mouth parted in shock. "You condone it?"

I shrugged. "If they had hurt his sister, I certainly agree with his methods." I glanced around. "I mean, isn't that what we are doing too?"

"I guess so." She pushed her hand through her hair. "Though it seems brutal. We just kill them."

I shrugged. Maybe part of me was as psychotic as Nico Morrelli, because the rare times I had to torture men to get information, I felt an odd satisfaction to give them taste of their own medicine.

"I feel like the culprit in your situation," Margaret interrupted my thoughts. "I know your mother is blaming me. And I can't even get drunk to ease the tension."

"Don't worry about my mother or Jack," I told her. "They'll get over it, and I'm a big girl. Besides, this allows me to get closer to the King trafficking business and get laid, so maybe I should thank you."

She rolled her eyes. "You get killed and I'll hunt you down. But… you should enjoy the spoils of war and take advantage of Cassio King. In and out of the bedroom… everywhere." I cocked my eyebrow but couldn't keep my lips from curving into a smile. Especially after that kiss yesterday.

I shook my head but felt my cheeks heat up. Yes, I couldn't wait to feel him inside me and relive that night from Vegas. But there was a worry that I'd get hooked on it. Crave it like the air I breathed. My imagination wasn't short of scenarios after getting a taste of it with Cassio and how good a man's touch could feel. Not just any man's touch… his specifically. He was all I could think about lately.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.” She winked. “But take my suggestion and get that fine piece of ass. Like tonight!”

“Now there is a grand idea,” I murmured.

We both chuckled softly. It was what I loved about her the most. She wasn’t afraid to go after what she wanted and she was not ashamed of enjoying carnal pleasures.

“Do you have the next location for The Rose Rescue?” Margaret asked in a low voice, changing the subject.

Now that she was pregnant, I didn’t want her to get wrapped up in any of our activities. Her baby was a priority. So, I had given the team instructions to remove Margaret from all correspondence. I knew she didn’t like it, but it was for her own safety.

It was the reason I was late. Reading a report on another shipment of women that Marco King was transporting through Turkey. John was chasing leads right at this moment. Then as if that wasn’t enough, I read the email Cassio sent to Jack about Chad Stewart. The motherfucker worked with Marco King. I’d wring his neck next time I saw him myself, though I suspected Cassio might get him before me.

Maybe if Cassio’s half-brother showed up to this intimate, family dinner I could kill him today, I thought wryly to myself. Dinner and murder show, just strike the mystery.

Though I knew Jack would never allow Marco King to step foot on the compound. He’d kill him first. And it seemed Cassio and Luca shared that hatred with us.

“So I’m out?” Margaret asked in a whiny voice.

I gave her a pointed look. She knew that I couldn’t have her involved with that stuff, putting her at risk nor our team.

“It is too dangerous,” I told her.

“Jesus, I’m barely pregnant,” she complained.

“There is no such thing as *barely* pregnant,” I comforted her. “You have to think about you and the baby’s safety.”

She groaned out loud. “I know; I know.”

We walked into the dining room where everyone was already waiting for me and our conversation immediately ceased.

“Sorry, I’m late,” I apologized with a smile as I turned to everyone. I went to my mother and hugged her lightly, pressing a kiss on her offered cheek. Then I hugged Jack. The tension was still high among the three of us since the parentage revelation. I’d been avoiding their calls. Avoidance never did anyone any good, but I needed time to come to terms with all of it.

“No matter,” Jack said. “You are here now and that is all that matters.”

With a quick nod, my eyes traveled over the crowd. Cassio stood with his family and a woman. It had to be the sister he mentioned. As she turned around, I frowned and recognition immediately set in.

“Bianca?” I called out, confusion clear in my voice.

“Hey there,” she left her brothers and the man I assumed was her husband and strode over to me. “Surprise!”

Holy shit, this was an unexpected surprise.

“I didn’t realize-” I started, glancing around. “You two are related,” I finished my sentence.

We hugged each other. It seemed it was centuries ago that we spent those few short months partying together in Maryland.

“You look great,” I told her.

Her hand fluttered to her stomach and I knew instantly she was pregnant.

“Thanks. You look great too.” She glanced over her shoulders, smiling then grabbed my hand and pulled me towards her group. “Meet my husband. Nico Morrelli.”

Ah, the Morrelli. I smiled and extended my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” he replied, his voice deep. “Bianca tells me you interned at Cassidy Enterprise. Sorry I missed you.” I tilted my head wondering at his odd comment. What did Cassidy Enterprise have to do with him? Then seeing my confusion, he added, “My family owns it.”

“Oh.” Indeed a small world. I nodded. “It was a long time ago,” I told him, observing him. Bianca got herself a hottie, and from the looks of it, he wasn’t tattooed up like my future husband. But somehow I preferred Cassio. “Besides, we did our best to ditch work and party, more often than not.”

Bianca chuckled. “Don’t tell them everything we did,” she winked. God, she looked happy. Over the top happy. “You met Cassio, of course. And Luca.” She turned her head to me. “Holy shit, we are going to be sisters-in-law. Who in the hell thought, huh?”

“Crazy,” I muttered. Not that I minded being her sister-in-law. How was it that I didn’t know she was part of the underworld?

“And these are our girls, Hannah and Arianna,” Bianca continued oblivious to my internal evaluations. Two identical blonde girls turned to face us and one of them rolled her eyes. She actually rolled her eyes! “Hannah, be nice!” Bianca scolded her.

“You lied, Mommy,” Hannah complained. “You said we will go see Matteo.”

The twin sister added. “You know he wants to marry her. If he doesn’t see her for a long time, he might forget her.”

Surprised by their sassiness, I couldn’t help but grin.

“God help me,” Bianca groaned under her breath and everyone laughed, including my mother and Jack.

“You are going to have your hands full with your girls,” my mother added softly.

“Ugh, I know,” Bianca said, then turned her eyes to the girls. “I didn’t lie, but if the two of you don’t behave, we won’t visit Matteo when we leave here.”

They eyed her suspiciously. “Who’s Matteo?” I asked curiously.

“I’m going to marry him,” announced Hannah.

Oh, determined little girl. Already had her sights on her future husband. I kind of envied her confidence.

“Mom and I haven’t agreed,” Nico told her, smiling.

“Neither have Uncle Cassio and I,” Luca chimed in, “It is bad enough our sister is married. We won’t stand for our nieces getting married.”

Cassio walked up to me, his stride powerful and his eyes scanning my body. His gaze on me felt like a breeze, but my body instantly heated up a few degrees. It was incomprehensible that my body never reacted like this. Ever! Yet, this man managed so effortlessly to turn me on with a simple, innocent look.

Well, not that innocent. It felt like he was stripping me naked with his eyes.

“That’s right, girls. You two will be nuns,” Cassio announced, then leaned over pressing his lips to my cheek. “Hello, Vita Mia,” he rasped softly against my cheek, so only I could hear him. His voice did things to me, melting my insides and mending the broken pieces within me. I really loved his endearment and the intimacy of it.

Now that I had a glimpse at the memory from long ago, maybe it made sense that I felt safe around him. I just wished I remembered it all.

“Cassio,” I greeted him, my tone slightly breathless. My heart fluttered in my chest, his scent, mixture of ocean and woodsy cologne, invading my senses. That scent would forever be his.

“Pffft.” Arianna broke the moment and we both turned to look at her. She rolled her eyes and waved her hand dismissing her uncles’ statement. “Whatever, dude.”

The room burst into laughter and somehow the atmosphere for the night had been set.

Jack, Cassio, and the men ended up talking among each other, while I hung back with Mom, Margaret, and Bianca. The twins were in their own world.

“Dinner is ready,” Mom announced.

“You should sit with us,” Margaret told Bianca. “So we can interrogate you.” Bianca gave her an odd look and I groaned inwardly. Margaret must have seen my expression so she quickly added, “What? Tell me you don’t have any questions, Áine. Like why didn’t we know you were related to Cassio?”

I looked at Bianca apologetically. “You don’t have to answer that.”

“It’s okay,” Bianca assured me then sighed deeply. “I learned when my dad-” she winced, “… ummm, when the man that raised me died.” Wow, this kind of felt like dé-jà vu. “It was a shock. And the whole thing with the belles arrangement.” My head snapped to her and she rolled her eyes. “Yeah, it was a lot to take in. Nico saved me from all that, otherwise Benito was going to sell me.”

The same terminology was in Cassio’s email to Jack. I was too focused on the fact that Marco and Chad were working together that the belles arrangement didn’t really seem important.

“Any chance you could expand on that whole arrangement?” I asked her. “Is it like a dating site?”

Bianca’s eyes flashed with anger. “No, it’s an auction,” she hissed. “They get women of important, rich, or influential families, and sell them like cattle to the highest bidder. Grace Vitale, Matteo’s mom, barely escaped. It’s horrific to think people could do that.” I nodded at a loss for words. There wasn’t a single thing I could possibly think to say. “My grandfather was one of those that signed that agreement with the Kings, and the women of our family were dragged into that clusterfuck.”

My eyes flickered to the men to ensure they couldn’t hear us. “And your brothers were okay with that?”

“Of course not!” Bianca almost sounded insulted on their behalf. “They had been fighting him for a long time.”

There was another confirmation.

“Sorry, I was just wondering-”

“Cassio and Luca suffered a lot under their father… our father,” she answered. “I don’t know the whole story, but they don’t agree with what their brother is doing, or when their father was responsible for it. Of course, Benito is dead now.”

A shadow crossed her face and I remembered the rumors. “Who killed him?” I couldn’t resist asking her.

Guilt passed her expression and lingered in her eyes. “Luca took the blame.”

I frowned at the odd answer. Margaret and I shared a quick glance. Before I could ask another question, Bianca’s husband came up to her and wrapped his arms around her.

“Ready to eat, Cara Mia?” I raised my eyebrow. “Remember, you are eating for three.”

She chuckled and I stared at her in disbelief. “You are pregnant with twins again?” I mean what were the odds! And honestly, seeing her ruthless husband that tortured and killed men acting like a big teddy bear… yeah, somehow it struck a nerve. In a good way. Was Cassio like that too?

“Yes,” she beamed. She was obviously happy about it.

“Wow.” Jesus, she’d have four kids and I was barely out of virginhood. What. The. Hell.

“I’m pregnant too,” Margaret chimed in. “Thank fuck not twins. I’m not sure what I’ll do with one kid.”

The room got uncomfortably silent. Margaret unintentionally reminded everyone that the Callahan family gypped Cassio and violated the agreement. Though after our conversation yesterday, I knew Cassio never intended to marry her. So he kind of set them up.

“I’m starving,” I broke the silence. “What’s for dinner, Mom?”

“Your favorite,” she said.

I turned to Bianca. “By the way, how is John?”

Her husband grumbled and my eyes snapped to him. Bianca took his hand, chuckling lightly. *He is jealous*, I realized. The big, bad mobster was jealous of good time John.

“He’s good,” Bianca answered, patting her husband’s hand. “Nico helped him kickstart his company back up.”

I raised my eyebrow. “Huh? I thought his company was doing great.”

Bianca rolled her eyes. “Umm, Nico bought his vendors out.”

“Oh.” Uncomfortable silence followed. “How is Angie? Those two dating again?”

Bianca shook her head. “Um, no. She hooked up with a guy that works for Nico. They just broke up, so she’s on the mend.”

“Oh.” I was certain Angie and John would have ended up together somehow, though I kind of wanted someone better for him. He was too good for Angie, but unfortunately the guy didn’t have eyes for anyone else.

“Áine, you sit next to me and Bianca will sit next to you.” My mother started directing our seating arrangement at the table.

The air between my mother and I was so tense, you could slice it with the knife.

“How about if Margaret sits next to you?” I suggested. It would be a good way for the two to talk out their issues and be done with it.

“You’ll have to talk to me eventually, Áine,” Mom reprimanded. I just couldn’t believe she would do it in this setting. We still haven’t talked about the whole change of paternity and lies that apparently loomed over our family. It was important, but it freaking hurt that she couldn’t have somehow eased me into it when those two got married. After all, I was old enough.

I avoided looking her way. “Of course,” I muttered. “I was just going to sit next to Cassio. Getting to know my future husband and all that. Since the wedding is this weekend. This is like speed dating to the altar.”

Someone choked out a laugh but quickly stifled it. Yes, I was using Cassio as an excuse. A chair dragging over the dining room hardwood floor echoed through the silence, and I took a seat next to Cassio with a smile on my face. His eyes twinkled while amusement played on his face.

“I think your mother is trying to butter you up,” Margaret blurted out as she sat herself down. “The whole wrong daddy thing. But don’t worry, your favorite dinner plate will fix it.” My head snapped to Margaret. She was unusually cranky. She shrugged. “Hormones.”

My lips tugged up. I had a feeling she’d use that excuse a lot. Though something was up; she usually wasn’t snappy nor the type to attack verbally.

“If you would have been responsible, Margaret Callahan, there wouldn’t have been any need to butter up.” Oh, shit! My mother was in the attack mode too.

“Well, excuse me for being the reason you finally had to divulge the truth,” Margaret snapped.

“Lovely,” I muttered, sneaking a view our guests’ way. They didn’t seem uncomfortable, almost as if they were used to family bickering. Sharing a glance with Bianca, I mumbled, “Just ignore them.”

I smiled sweetly to Luca and Cassio. “Welcome to the family,” I announced.

Bianca chuckled. “Oh, we’ll have to visit a lot. You live here?”

“No, in the city.” I glanced at Mom. She and Margaret were bickering sotto voce.

“Oh, that’s right,” Luca chimed in. “Cassio owns that building.”

My head snapped to him, everyone else forgotten. “What?”

“Luca,” Cassio growled.

“Oops.” Though I was certain Luca didn’t slip. He wanted me to know Cassio owned the building.

“So Áine, are you all ready for the wedding?” Bianca asked, trying to steer the conversation away from the bomb.

I shook my head. “Not sure,” I muttered. “I think so.” I hadn’t done a single thing to prepare for it. I figured Mum had it all going. I locked eyes with Cassio. “So you own that building?”

He nodded in confirmation.

“I guess it makes sense now why it’s so secure.” Because what else could I possibly say. “You live there too?”

“Yeah, sometimes I stay there.”

“You knew I lived there?”

“Yes.” Well, at least he didn’t lie.

“Anything else I should know?” I questioned him.

“I own HC.”

“Hmmm.” Wow, he has been so close all this time and I never ran into him. Not once! “I guess we could carpool next time.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about it. It felt a bit stalkerish. Strike a bit. It was all the way stalkerish.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” Bianca muttered. “It is Cassio’s way of protecting you. Trust me, Nico was no better.”

“What?” Nico growled, feigning discontent on his face though his half-smile kind of ruined it.

She rolled her eyes. “Birth control,” she scolded him. “Do I need to say more? Because there is more.”

Nico offered her the most bedazzling smile and would have made me fall for the man if I wasn’t already so wrapped up into Cassio.

“But that’s what you love about me, Cara,” he drawled.

I shook my head in disbelief. Bianca had that man wrapped around her little finger.

My eyes darted to Margaret and Mom. They were still bickering back and forth in hushed tones. Maybe placing Margaret next to Mom wasn't such a grand idea after all.

"Well, if you didn't-" My mother's voice rose an octave too loud, attracting everyone's eyes back to the two of them.

"What the fuck is going on?" Jack gritted. Yeah, wouldn't we all like to know. My guess was that my mother went all protective over me and now was blaming Margaret for the situation I found myself in. Though, somehow it all worked out for the best, and Margaret wasn't to blame. Cassio lived in my apartment building. Maybe I could get him to tell me another thing tonight, over dinner. Well, we are having dinner now. Over drinks?

I turned to ask Cassio when Margaret's voice stopped me.

"Tell your wife to get off my case," Margaret hissed at my mother. "Yes, we know I fucked up. And Áine wouldn't be in this situation if I hadn't fucked up. But here we are. What do you want me to do about it?"

The twins stopped playing, their eyes darting around each adult in the room.

"Margaret Callahan," Jack's voice held a note of warning. But knowing that Cassio would have never married her lifted all the blame off my cousin. A thought snuck into my mind. Cassio said he never would have married Margaret, but he didn't clarify how he was going to ensure he didn't. What if-

No! That would be a step too far.

"Áine, you-" My mother tried to explain, but I cut her off.

"Mum, whatever it is," I spoke in a low voice, "… this really isn't the time. And let Margaret be," I warned. "You can't blame her for your damn decisions over twenty-five

years ago.” *Nor the possible set up by my future husband,* I added silently.

My mother could be quite protective and overbearing sometimes, but I wouldn’t let her attack my cousin. If she needed someone to blame for this arrangement gone wrong, she just had to look at her husband.

“Fucking fantastic that your family is just as messy as ours,” Luca announced with a wide grin.

I narrowed my eyes on Luca. “I wouldn’t bet on it, Luca,” I said, bringing the glass of wine to my lips. “After all, my family doesn’t deal in human trafficking.”

“Kiddo, what has gotten into you?” Jack growled, but I just shrugged unperturbed.

“Not much,” I answered. “In fact, I’m having a grand time.”

I smiled sweetly and he shook his head. “Stubborn woman. It must be the Irish in you, I guess.”

My eyes snapped to him. It wasn’t the first time he’d said that. Except, it was the first time that it held the truth. Before I’d take it as his adoption, but now, it meant more. Damn it! He’d been giving me signs all along, and I just never read into them.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

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CASSIO

I watched as Bianca and Áine hugged each other for the third time, promising they'd see each other more frequently. Each time I thought of Áine back in Turkey, that scene playing out in my mind, the punch in my gut was abrupt. I'd lose my goddamn mind to lose her now.

Another hug and the two women that meant everything to me chuckled. "We act like two old ladies," Bianca remarked with humor in her voice.

Margaret disappeared after dinner, excusing herself with a headache. Luca wasn't far behind her. I didn't have a good feeling about those two. Margaret was a wild thing. Luca didn't need wild; it would send him off the rails.

Áine gave me the idea of a carpool, so I convinced her I'd drive her home. After all, we were neighbors.

"Cassio, I have to warn you," Jack grumbled, muttering a few curses under his breath. He hid it well but he wasn't pleased to see his daughter married to me. I couldn't blame him, except that she was mine. Even though I was talking to Nico and Jack, my eyes were on Áine the entire time. "I see my daughter cry once, you'll be dead before you know it. I see her distressed, I'll torture you before I kill you."

Nico grinned. "Oh, payback is a bitch," he rumbled. "Add a few more threats, Callahan," Nico encouraged him.

Fucker!

I couldn't well flip him a middle finger in front of my future father-in-law.

"Got it," I told Callahan in a cold voice. If he was threatening me about anything else, he'd be dead. Since it was for the well-being of his daughter, I'd give him a pass. "Heads up though," I warned him. "Áine won't be seeing Dr. Taylor anymore."

Jack stiffened, his eyes flickering to the women. "Áine told you about it?"

"We both agreed it was for the best," I told him, keeping it brief. "Please make sure your wife understands that too."

Jack shoved his hand through his silver hair. "It was bound to happen," he muttered. "It was one of the reasons she insisted on moving out." I cocked my eyebrow in surprise. When I didn't say anything, Jack continued, "Áine remembers the events through nightmares and disjointed images. They give her headaches, bad migraines. Emily could spot it and would take her to Dr. Taylor before the headaches got too bad. Áine liked to push her timeline. Extend the length of the visits further and further apart, grasping for those wretched memories. To understand them. Those two got into it and Áine insisted on moving out. Emily frets over her, and our daughter hates it not understanding what it all derived from-"

We all knew what it was derived from. Áine's mother blamed herself. It didn't make any sense but there it was. Just as I blamed myself for my mother's death and Benito's wrongdoings against my friends.

I nodded in understanding. Jack put his one hand on my shoulder, the move fatherly. "You just make sure you take care of her. And keep her from that filthy half-brother of yours."

He walked away without another word, joining the women.

“Do you have a time and location for that final belle auction yet?” I asked Nico once Jack was out of earshot.

He shook his head. “I’m working on it. I have a list of women they intend to use for this auction. I gave a heads up to Luciano and Vasili. Isabella and Grace are on that auction list too.”

“Does Bianca know?” I asked him.

Nico’s eyes sought out Bianca. He was worried too. Despite all his security and guards, he couldn’t help but worry. He finally found something good and just like the rest of us, he was scared of losing it. The rage he went through after his sister’s death would be doubled if something would ever happen to Bianca or their kids.

“No,” he finally answered. “I told her there are some bad things going on and we had to be on high alert. She kept the twins home this week, which suited me fine.” Except he knew keeping them in the compound indefinitely wouldn’t work.

“All good with pregnancy?” I asked him.

Nico’s face actually softened. “Yeah, all good. Strong heartbeats. Got sonogram pictures. Bianca didn’t want to share them with you and overshadow the engagement.”

“Nonsense.” Just as I said that Áine and Bianca joined us.

“What’s nonsense?” Bianca inquired.

“I want to see the sonogram pictures,” I told her. “After all, I am *the* favorite uncle. The other one disappeared on us.”

She chuckled. “Just you wait until Luca hears that.” She glanced behind her. “Girls, leave Mrs. Callahan alone. We have to go.”

Jack’s wife was giving them treats for the road. They’d be hyper and it wasn’t like they needed more energy.

Áine rolled her eyes. “Just so you know, she *never* let me have sweets at that age.”

Bianca chuckled. “Just you wait until you have your kids. It will make you even more resentful.”

Áine’s cheeks reddened. “Let’s see those sonogram pictures,” she changed the subject. “I hope you have boys and they look like your husband.”

Twenty minutes later, I had Áine in my car, driving home.

“Fancy car,” she commented as I left Jack’s compound. She twirled the engagement ring around her finger. I was happy to see her wearing it.

“It’s just a car,” I answered. “Áine?”

“Hmmm.”

“Do you like the ring?”

She glanced down to it, as if she wasn’t aware she was fidgeting with it.

“I do,” she replied. “Though to be honest, I’m not much for rings.”

It didn’t surprise me to hear it. Especially since she did field work. Jewelry hindered fighting. The five-carat diamond was set in antique settings that belonged to my nonna.

“You’ll have to wear the wedding ring,” I told her. “Tattoo offer still stands.”

Her soft chuckle filled the car. “I will.” Silence filled the car and before she even opened her mouth, I knew she had a question. “Hunter?”

“Hmmm.”

“Did you set up Margaret to get pregnant?”

Fuck!

“I set her up to be invited to a masquerade party she had been wanting to attend,” I finally told her. “Of course, I couldn’t guarantee the pregnancy. But I was going to use her inappropriate behavior to corner Jack.”

She didn’t like it. “That’s fucked up.”

“I never said I was an honorable man.”

Her delicate eyebrows creased. “Yet, somehow you saved me.”

I remained silent for a while, and I wondered if this was her pissed off mood.

“Don’t do it again,” she finally broke the silence. I nodded. “And you should apologize to her.”

“You do know she did worse things than just that?”

“I don’t care, Cassio,” she said, her teeth slightly clenched. I also noted she switched from Hunter to Cassio. She was mad. “Her life, her choices. It is different when she is set up. And she’s family.”

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Chapter Thirty-Three

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ÁINE

I narrowed my eyes on him, waiting for an answer. Yet, he seemed untroubled by his admission. I refused to let anyone, man or woman, take advantage, hurt or manipulate people I cared about. No matter how damn hot they were.

"Cassio?" I said through clenched teeth. Each second that he didn't answer added another notch to my anger. Yeah, this gene I got from Jack Callahan alright.

"I like it better when you call me Hunter."

I blinked confused. *Wait. What?*

I didn't realize I switched from Hunter to Cassio, but that hardly seemed to be the point right now. After a tense stretch of time, he gave me a fleeting glance.

"I won't do it again to your family and friends," he agreed.

With a small exhale, the tightness in my chest eased. It wasn't a big argument, but it gave me a glimpse of how we would work. We had chemistry, but marriage was a lot more than chemistry and this conversation gave me hope. *Hope for us.*

"Why do you want to rush the wedding?" I asked him out of nowhere.

He swiftly switched lanes before throwing me another look. “I thought it was clear. Two years is a long time to wait for someone.”

“We could date,” I proposed. Though, waiting wasn’t really thrilling for me either. But something about spending your wedding day that was prepared with someone else in mind didn’t sit well with me.

“You don’t want to marry me?” His voice was relaxed, his posture never changed, except for the grip on his steering wheel. It was barely noticeable but it tightened, giving me a glimpse of his white knuckles.

“I just never imagined it would go like this,” I told him. “A day that has been prepared for someone else for such a long time and suddenly it is my day.”

“Butterfly, do *you* want to marry me?” The question was simple. Surprisingly the answer was simple too. The man I have been talking to for the past six weeks, that I kissed two years ago and again in Vegas. But it was so much more than just a lover’s touch. He made me feel safe. Despite being the son of the very person that killed my father and brother of the man that featured in my nightmares.

Cassio Hunter King made me feel safe.

“I do.” A little sigh echoed in the closed space, and I wasn’t sure whether it was mine or his.

His car came to a stop and I glanced around, realizing we were back at my apartment building. His building. He parked and turned to face me, his big palms on both of my cheeks.

“Tell me what you want, Áine,” he demanded. “I want you to get what you always dreamed of. Big wedding, small wedding. Anything.”

The look he gave me burned right through my soul. The maddening desire in his dark depths made me feel wanted, protected, cherished. It was all it took.

Our eyes held and my breath hitched, while my heart fluttered lightly. He pressed his lips against mine and I

sucked in my breath. His kisses were so incredibly hot, sending fire right down to my toes. The term curling toes finally made sense. A groan resounded in his chest, his hand pushed into my hair at the nape and held me firm. He slipped his tongue into my mouth, pulling on my bottom lip between his teeth and a hazy rush of lust pooled in my lower stomach.

“Hunter?” I murmured softly against his lips.

“Hmmm.”

“Your apartment or mine?” Suddenly we were back in Vegas, and I knew the answer before he opened his mouth.

“Fuck,” he grunted. “Mine.”

It took us five minutes to get to his floor. We busted through his apartment door entangled in each other, our mouths colliding and our hands hungry. I have no idea how we found ourselves in the bedroom, Hunter seated on the edge of the bed, me grinding my hot core against his thigh, while our tongues danced to the tune only the two of us could hear.

My nipples tightened, tingling in expectation. Heat pulsated between my thighs, wanting to feel his cock deep inside me.

“Hunter, I-” What do I say? I needed him. Like the sun needed the moon to balance the night against the day. His touch ignited me and calmed me. Now that I was so close to him, breathing in his scent, feeling his eyes consume me so effortlessly, my heart was stuck in my throat. I wanted him so much. He would light the match to my body, and I’d disintegrate to dust without him. I brushed a hand across his neck and into his thick dark hair. “I really want to marry you,” was all I ended up saying in a breathless voice.

I would be his wife in every sense of the word. At least, I’d try to.

His calloused hands came to my thighs in a light touch and skimmed up my flesh, under my dress, leaving a trail of sparks in its path. His fingers grew firm, gripping the flesh

sending the unbearable ache between my legs. His palms slid under my panties, gripping my ass. My fingers curled in his hair, the hot and slick need for him making me lose all my senses.

“Hunter-” his name escaped my lips on a sigh. He pulled my dress over my head, discarding it onto the floor. My eyes remained locked on him, basking in the look in his eyes that whispered soundless promises that I was sure he’d keep.

My bra followed the dress, all the while my chest rose up and down with anticipation. I haven’t felt him since Vegas. I lifted up onto my feet, standing between his wide open knees, my legs slightly shaky.

He tugged the panties down my legs, and I already craved his touch. Both my mind and my body whispered that I had been waiting for him. He was mine and I was his.

My eyes closed with the intensity of how right that felt. To be his and claim him for mine. His hands came back between my thighs and without a warning, his one finger pushed inside me.

“Fuck,” he rasped in a rough voice. His voice ran down my spine. This man was everything. Love, lust, and happiness. The thought rang in the furthest corner of my mind, but it drowned out as his mouth latched onto my breast and he dragged his teeth across my nipple. All the while his finger fucked me slowly, in and out. My head fell back and my hands came up to his neck, holding on to him like my own rock. He kept moving his finger, the pressure building between my legs until it was too much, and I was scared I’d disintegrate into ashes.

I swayed into him, uncaring if I burned out. It wouldn’t be such a bad way to go, with his mouth on me and his touch branding my skin.

“So fucking wet,” he growled. Two fingers slid deep inside me, and my head fell back with a moan.

“Hunter-” I panted. The pressure built; I was so close as he fingered me hard and fast. Over and over. My skin was so hot and fire burned in my lower belly, creating a blaze that only he could feed.

His mouth worshiped my breast, his tongue and teeth alternating between nipping and kissing. His fingers slipped in and out of me, brushing against my clit, building the pressure. Until it burst into flame, shooting white lights behind my eyelids. A shudder fluttered through my body, as languid heat spread through every inch of my blood.

His lips nibbled on my earlobe and his deep, raspy voice rumbled through me. “Mine. Forever.”

His claim should have brought me back to earth, but instead I floated higher into space. My heart beat hard against my ribcage. I opened my eyes and met burning flames in the depths of his dark eyes.

“I want more,” I breathed, reaching for the zipper of his pants. My fingers fumbled with it, eager for more of that height he gave me a glimpse of in Vegas. We were two opposites - me naked, him in his three-piece suit. Yet, we fit perfectly together. Like two teenagers, we both worked on discarding every single piece of his clothing. Then finally, my eyes took him in, his glorious chest on display, his tan skin and abs on full display. I loved his tattoos. Every single one of them, starting from his hand to his forearm, neck and down his chest.

I waited for you too long and now I want it all.

“Stand up,” he rasped, a hard demand in his voice. He was jerking me upwards, spread my legs and pulled me close. My pussy was next to his face. I braced myself with a hand on his shoulder, his hands dug into my butt and his face buried into my pussy. Fire ignited like a volcano, his mouth sucked and licked, nipping at my clit. My skin seared with need. My nails dug into his shoulder and I rolled my hips against his mouth. He was killing me,

stealing my breath and sanity. And I couldn't have been happier about it.

Before the release shot through me, he grabbed my hips, slid me onto his lap and slammed inside of me.

A choked cry escaped me. He stilled, his eyes darkening and burning hot. I was still tender and sore.

"I'm sorry," he murmured silky. His hands gentled on me. He leaned forward and took my lips with reverence, kissing me. Capturing my top lip between his, my body relaxed with each gentle kiss and touch he gave me. He leaned and ran his lips down the length of my throat, trailing kisses that would brand me as his for the rest of my life. No matter how short it turned out to be.

"I'll give you everything," he rasped a promise I knew he would keep. His scruff brushed my soft skin, his teeth nipping at my collarbone. I sighed, my hands roamed his body. I wanted to feel every muscle, know every inch of him. His touch on me was hungry, urgent and it fed the flames within me. I never wanted them extinguished.

I rolled my hips, slow and easy at first. The soreness was there but the fire and need for him was greater. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and buried my face into his neck, inhaling deeply. He smelled like a perfect mixture of oceans and woodsy cologne. Like safety, desire and love.

A shiver ran through me, the heat sparkling as I ground my clit against his pelvis. His hands roamed down my back, his hard palms scraping against my soft skin. They paused at my ass and his fingers dug into it, pulling me harder against him. He was deep inside me and with each roll of my hips against him, my moans became breathier, louder. I rose an inch and then slid back down, moving up and down against his shaft.

His hands took control and started moving me up and down. He took my mouth into his and captured my next moan. He fucked me, guiding my body up and down over

him and hot pressure began to build. My breaths were heavy, my chest ready to explode.

“Fuck, Áine,” he groaned. He lowered his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth, and with each thrust inside me, his teeth pulled on the sensitive buds.

“Oh, God,” I moaned. “Hunter, please.“

His fingers dug into my hips and he thrusted again. Hard. And again. He took my lips into a hard kiss, bit into my lower lip and my body shuddered, the pressure burst into a million stars. His body tensed, pressed his face against my throat, let out a groan and bit my neck as he found his release.

This. This was what it was all about.

Love. Passion.

It was what made people lose all sense - wage wars, burn cities, pledge loyalty, kill. I’d kill anyone that hurt this man. Just as I knew deep down, he’d kill anyone that hurt me.

We remained still, both of our breathings frantic, my skin hot against his. Chest to chest. Heartbeat to heartbeat.

Together.

Hours later, both of us laid in bed, sweat glistening on our skin and the only sound was our heavy breathing. We just finished round three. Or was it four? I didn’t have a clue; I was in a pleasure induced coma.

Holy shit!

My heart still raced from what we had done. I felt this intense connection to him; it was raw and all-consuming. He dozed off, but I was too wound up to sleep. Besides, subconsciously I worried about dreams that would certainly follow. So I’d bask in this amazing feeling for as long as I could, as I listened to his even breathing. His strong heartbeat against mine.

He was exceptionally good in bed. It made me jealous of all the women that were lucky to have felt his hands and his mouth before me. A possessive feeling swelled in my

chest at the thought of any other woman touching him. Or even worse, Hunter wanting another woman.

Then a thought hit me and I jolted up.

“Hunter?”

His eyes snapped open and he reached for his gun, his gaze darting around the room.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice slightly hoarse.

I chuckled. Okay, maybe I should have just given him a light nudge.

“Put the gun away,” I told him. “Nobody is attacking.”

“Fuck!” He shoved it back into his nightstand and turned my way. “What’s the matter?”

I realized too late that it might not be the best time to discuss this, but too late now. He was wide awake. I kept chewing on my bottom lip, trying to figure out a delicate way to discuss the terms of our marriage.

He took my face between his hands, both of our naked bodies brushing against each other and just like that I was turned on again.

“Butterfly, just spill it,” he murmured, brushing his nose against mine.

“Our marriage will be exclusive, right?” I blurted out. “Because you’re mine and I’ll-” *Kill anyone that touches you.*

Okay, it would seem I was slightly possessive.

This passion we shared was mine, and I refused to share it. I wasn’t the tame, good wife that would put up with her husband’s demands and wishes, but I’d be there for him and he’d be there for me. Nobody else. And truth be told, if I found him to be unfaithful, I didn’t think I’d be able to keep my temper in check.

“I will be only yours and you will be only mine.” His voice was serious. “You’ll be the only woman I’ll be fucking.”

Relief washed over me, like cool water against heated skin. This uncertainty was foreign to me, and I didn’t like

the feeling. For years I'd heard Margaret and other girlfriends talk about insecurities, suffering over men that didn't call or didn't care, and could never relate. And now, it was all slamming into me like a freight train.

"Cassio, I think we should probably talk about-" I searched for words. There was so much that we didn't know about each other. Actually, we knew nothing about each other. "I guess everything," I finally muttered.

It wasn't just the question of the arranged marriage. There was so much more - images that now I knew were connected to him, his family that was one of the most feared ones on this planet, my determination to bring the King's human trafficking to an end and our future together. I was smart enough to know that divorce in the underworld wasn't a possibility and living for the rest of my life just settling wouldn't work for me.

He nodded his agreement, pulling me into his embrace, my ear pressed to his heartbeat.

"We are going to do this in the middle of the night, huh?" he teased. "You want to go first?" he asked. He didn't seem frazzled nor nervous. Truthfully, I was a bit of both. Usually, I kept my shit together, but around him, parts of me that I thought were broken just came to life and confused the crap out of me.

I shrugged. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said. "Let's hear it."

I took a shaky breath in and then slowly let it out. In a strange way, his scent and warmth comforted me. "I know you've had someone following me so I assume you know about my side business of saving trafficked women," I blurted out.

"I know." I didn't expect that answer so I raised my head, searching out his eyes.

The moon was full, throwing off shadows on both of us through his large floor to ceiling window overlooking the city.

“How do you know?”

“Just a few days ago, you were in Turkey,” he said in a soft voice, pulling me close. “You scared the living daylights out of me, rescuing those women, being in harm’s way.” We watched each other, his eyebrows furrowed as if it pained him to remember the whole event. “You won’t be reckless with your life like that again.”

“You were there?” I questioned him with a furrowed brow.

He nodded. “Luca and I. We were shooting at the men that were shooting at you.”

“At the compound?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No.” There wasn’t a second of hesitation before he responded. “Luca and I got a tip that Marco had a shipment of women delivered there,” he answered, holding my gaze. “We were going to get them out and level that place to the ground. But you beat me to it. And I had Nico dig up everything on you.” He smiled, unapologetically. “I want to take care of you, keep you safe.”

I tilted my head watching for any deceit but my sixth sense was telling me he was truthful.

“You weren’t there for the women?” I asked in a quiet tone.

“I don’t agree with human trafficking,” he said in a hard tone. “It’s non-negotiable.” He took my chin between his fingers. “How long until you trust me?”

Leaning closer to him, I pressed my mouth to his. I was falling for him, fast and hard.

“I do trust you, Hunter,” I murmured against his lips. “Not understanding why my body and mind trust you is what is scaring the shit out of me.”

It was the truth. I was operating on my instinct, but things that lingered in the shadows were scaring me.

“You just need time,” he said in a raspy, hushed tone. “Don’t force it, Butterfly.”

“You said we’ve met before,” I said, determined to get a hint. A nudge in the right direction. Anything. “I need a clue.” Anything would be better than these distorted images of his hand reaching for me. Carrying me. “Where have I seen you? When?” His lips curved, and I knew what he was thinking about. “I’m not talking about two years ago,” I added quickly, my cheeks warming. He was trying to distract me.

“We met eleven years ago,” he finally said. “I can’t tell you the details. You will have to remember those on your terms.” I frowned. Everything always went back to when I was fourteen. That year was such a fuzzy year, and I could barely recall it. I remembered every single thing that happened when I was ten, eleven, twelve. Any year, but that one. Somehow that year seemed important. A key to something that I couldn’t quite distinguish. He took my hand and squeezed. “When you remember, I’ll answer all your questions. But it wouldn’t be fair for me to give you my version of our encounter. You lived through it, and you need to remember how you saw it.”

Absent-mindedly, I traced the rose tattoo on his hand with a featherlight touch. A quick flash of an image. A man’s hand with a rose tattoo reaching for me. The image was clear as day. My eyes lowered to the tattoo on his hand. Now I knew it was Cassio’s tattoo, but I needed more. Patience was a virtue, I was told. But to me it wasn’t. Remembering it all was life or death to me.

Then a memory came. Out of nowhere, clear as day.

“The prime minister’s daughter?” The pilot I had never seen shouted, watching the man behind me. The pilot seemed shocked, but I focused on the hands keeping me safe. Tattooed hands keeping me secured.

“Butterfly, can I check your shoulder?” A low voice asked tentatively. I met the familiar dark gaze, waiting for my permission. I didn’t understand why he wanted to check it, but I trusted him. He saved me. I gave him a small nod

and his inked hand unbuttoned top button of my dirty blouse and checked the back of my shoulder. It only took a second before he buttoned my shirt back.

“Thank you.”

My eyes locked on Cassio’s one hand that rested around me. My brows furrowed. These images were so disjointed, it was hard to understand them. It almost felt like a memory, but then it didn’t.

“Why can’t I remember?” I asked him, raising my eyes to his. “It’s like a disjointed, broken up movie with bits and pieces.”

“Probably a combination of a coping mechanism and other stuff,” he answered. He wouldn’t tell me anything else, I knew it.

“Two years ago, did you know who I was?” I was all over the place, the topics incoherent but somehow connected in my mind.

“Yes.” When I arched my brow, he continued. “There aren’t two of you, Butterfly. I recognized you the second you bumped into me.”

My heart acted weird around him. My whole body hummed with anticipation.

“The arranged marriage with Margaret-” The words trailed off. I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to say.

“Callahan wouldn’t let me have you,” he finally said as if he could read my thoughts. “It has always been you, Áine.” My heart raced, unlike ever before. He was the only man that managed to stir this reaction. “There hasn’t been another woman for me since we crossed paths two years ago.”

Bum. Bum.

Bum. Bum.

Bum. Bum.

If there was a part of me I held back, it just became Hunter’s. He owned every ounce of me. If he dragged me to

hell, I'd follow. Because Cassio Hunter King was safety, craving and love, all wrapped in one.

"I don't want to marry you for a wedding that was arranged for Margaret," I admitted in a low voice. It was petty, but I wanted something just his and just mine. He was *mine*. To hell with anyone else.

He sat up, pulling me up with him. "What are you saying?"

"Can't it just be you and me?" I asked. "We could do the big wedding some other time."

He watched me pensively, but it was hard to tell what thoughts crossed his mind.

"Your parents won't be happy."

"Okay, so we tell them to meet us at City Hall," I suggested. "Your family too."

He chuckled softly, pressing his mouth against mine. "I like that idea. Let's do a big wedding in Italy with Nonno. He pretty much raised Luca and I." I nodded eagerly, loving this idea with every second. "Tomorrow, you'll be my wife."

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Chapter Thirty-Four

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CASSIO

City Hall was empty, and it smelled of old paper, years of wedding vows and promises made in front of officiants.

For the hundredth time today, my eyes darted Áine's way. Her heels clicked against the marble floor, her steps keeping up with me and my eyes sought out her ocean blues again. Her presence calmed me, settled me in the best way possible. Her hands clutched the dress, lifting it off the floor. The dress was simple, accenting her slim waist. The neckline was accentuated but not too much and her hair framed her face, the color stark against the pearl white of the silky dress. And those lips!

She carried herself like a queen. My queen.

The last few days went unexpectedly. After our midnight pillow talk, I sent a message to Luca, Bianca and Nico asking them to meet us at City Hall. Áine did the same with her parents and Margaret.

This new plan suited me just fine. I'd rather she was mine sooner rather than later. And marrying her in church with Nonno present felt right.

Her hand squeezed mine and my gaze traveled over her again. It was impossible to keep my eyes off her. She was the most gorgeous woman I had ever seen. The fiercest too.

When we got up this morning, we showered together. I washed her hair, running shampoo through her flaming red locks, then rinsing it off. Then she insisted on washing me, her slender fingers roaming my body. I couldn’t resist her; I pressed her up against the wall and she wrapped her legs around my waist as I slid inside her. She was ready for me, wet and hot, and as I thrust in and out of her, nothing felt as good. We fit right, like two pieces of the same puzzle.

After our shower together, I took her down the private staircase from my apartment to hers that nobody in the building had access to but us. She entered her apartment and before she slid inside it, I asked her to leave her hair down. She wanted to surprise me with her wardrobe choice and she certainly did.

Now as I watched her glorious, long mane reflecting red flames under the rays of sun and the lights, I couldn't help but marvel at it. She left her hair down for me. *For me.*

A simple request and she granted it without fishing for more compliments or asking the reasons. Luca narrowed his eyes on me, studying me. He disagreed with rushing this. He thought I was too eager.

Damn straight I am.

We’d get married in the church and appease our families, but she’d be mine already. Fuck delays and fuck anyone that attempted to steal my woman from me. There was no reason to wait and tempt fate.

Besides, her ***yes*** for this meant more than anything else. I asked her to marry me and she agreed. I wasn’t forcing her down the aisle to marry me. She asked for this, and I was more than happy to appease her. No pressure from her father or the possibility of a broken agreement. Áine said yes; she took a chance on me.

Her gaze lifted to mine and a soft smile played around her mouth. “Since this was a last minute decision,” she said, barreling right through the fact that I couldn’t peel my eyes off of her, “I didn’t have time to get you a ring.”

“That’s okay.” I didn’t give a shit about a ring. I just wanted her to be mine. Mrs. Áine King, my wife.

She eyed me up and down, almost appreciatively. “But I care. So I hope you don’t mind wearing my grandfather’s. It is one of my family heirlooms. He only had Mom so it passed to me, instead of a male heir.”

I stopped and faced her. “If you’d rather hold on to it.”

She shook her head, grinning wide, and her eyes shimmering happily. “I want you to have it.”

Fuck, she made me so happy. “Thank you.”

She couldn’t even imagine how much her gesture meant to me. Her faith in me. It was priceless.

Another shared look and we stepped into the room with the officiant waiting for us.

Our family was here already - Jack and his wife, Margaret, Luca, Bianca and Nico with their girls.

Áine’s mother rushed to us. “Why are we changing plans?” she questioned, her eyes narrowing on me.

“I asked H-... umm, Cassio if we could just do this,” Áine explained, her hand squeezing mine. She was already falling into a habit calling me Hunter, but she reserved it for when we were alone. I liked it. “I prefer this to a circus. Besides, Cassio’s Nonno should be present for the big wedding, so we’ll do that there.”

It was already in the works. I sent a note last night informing Nonno we’d be married in his church. To say he was all ecstatic was an understatement. The arrangements were in progress already.

“But why rush?” Callahan inquired.

“Why wait?” I retorted.

Luca grinned with a cat-that-ate-the-canary look on his face. “I’d say, let’s get this over with,” he added, winking at my soon-to-be bride. “Maybe she is knocked up.”

“I’m not,” Áine objected, glaring at Luca. “But you will be knocked out if you don’t watch it.”

Luca just grinned, unconcerned. He should be, because I'd help my wife and he'd never be able to overpower both of us.

Nico and Bianca came up, the two women hugging each other. "Oh my gosh, we are going to be sisters," Bianca beamed. "And wait until you meet Nonno. You will love him. This is definitely a much better plan for a wedding. Thanks to your wedding in Sicily, Nico and I will have a second honeymoon."

Nico chuckled. "We barely got back from our first one."

But that would not deter my sister.

The officiant cleared his throat and everyone rushed back to their seats.

The two of us, hand-in-hand, stepped forward. It took all of a few minutes to listen to his words, then we repeated the vows, and I slipped the ring I'd gotten for her onto her finger. Next it was her turn to do the same and she slid a heavy, yellow gold ring onto my finger with a square black diamond in the center.

"I pronounce you husband and wife," the officiant announced and a heavy weight lifted off my chest.

She was my wife. My life.

After City Hall, we all went to Maria's pizzeria. It was Áine's idea and I loved her even more for it. Maria and her husband closed down the shop and dedicated it all to us. Luciano, Grace, their boy, and Mr. Vitale joined us too. All in all, the afternoon ended up being full of laughter, music, and reminiscing. Just as a wedding day should be. It was simple but Áine looked happy and that was all that mattered to me.

There was a quiet confidence about her and that reserved smile I saw on her during our engagement dinner

disappeared around people that mattered.

“Welcome to the family, Áine,” Mr. Vitale hugged my wife, his fragile frame almost matching my wife’s. He was getting up in his years, but I hadn’t seen him so excited in a long time. He finally had his daughter-in-law and a grandchild back. He was beaming.

She grinned widely, looking just as happy as Mr. Vitale. “Thank you.” Her eyes fleeted to his family for a moment, then returned back to him. “Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

Grace joined in with Bianca, smiling wide and rubbing her belly at the same time.

“We wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” Grace announced softly. “Give it to Cassio to be the first man in the group not to drag the woman down the aisle. It was a true cause for celebration.”

Áine’s laugh rang through the small restaurant, her eyes shining with excitement. Luciano and Nico gave their wives a warning look, but both men looked too happy to be efficient.

My wife fit in.

Callahan was wrong when he said Áine didn’t belong in this life. She was everything the underworld needed. Her strength, intelligence, and her loyalty had the potential to tear down men in the underworld that meant harm. And she wouldn’t need any man for it. Áine, Grace, and Bianca were exactly the type of queens we needed.

A powerful king needed a strong queen at his side. Áine King was all that, and so much more.

I watched her excuse herself with a smile and walk over to her parents. I knew she’d hug it out with them. She mentioned on our way to City Hall that she didn’t like to hold grudges and while she was upset that they kept her parentage to Jack a secret, she just wanted to move on from it all.

Hours of laughter and stories, and I had to admit our little reception was better than anything else I could have imagined. Luca grabbed a passerby out on the street and asked her to snap a photo of us. With the Sicily landscape themed wall painted behind us and scent of Italian ingredients in the air, the moment was forever captured in the late April afternoon.

On our way out of the restaurant, I told Maria our wedding would be in Italy. She said she wouldn't miss it for the world, so we would be seeing her again. Soon.

I pulled up in my designated spot, in the private section of the garage of our building in the city.

"We are home, Butterfly."

I turned to look at her. Her eyes took my breath away every goddamn time. The blue depths of the oceans that could pull you in deeper and deeper. Her lips curved into a soft smile, as she fidgeted with her wedding band. She didn't know it, but I had a tracker embedded into it. Her location would always be sent to my phone. I'd take no chances with her life.

My eyes locked on her finger, branded with my wedding ring.

Mine.

It would tell the world she was mine. But more importantly, she told me she was mine. In her soft voice she pledged herself to me. Until death do us part. Willingly. It was priceless.

During the small dinner, we came to our first married compromise. She asked to wear her band but not engagement ring. It interfered when she drew and she wasn't accustomed to wearing jewelry. Though she would wear it for special occasions, and she'd never take the wedding band off.

"I think you called me Butterfly when we first met," she said pensively.

I nodded. It was the only word that mattered when it came to her. *Vita Mia* because she was my life. *Butterfly* because she had the strength to survive.

Last night I saw firsthand what Jack was talking about. The terror on her face gutted me. The nightmare plagued her, but the most terrifying thing was that she didn't scream or whimper. She thrashed, her lips pressed tightly, refusing a sound to pass through her lips.

And I couldn't do anything to help her. To chase them all away. To kill the ghosts as I killed those men.

"I did," I admitted, brushing my finger over her soft lips. "Callahan said you had a birthmark, a butterfly, and somehow it stuck."

"It is the reason I avoid wearing open back dresses," she admitted with a smile.

"Don't hide it," I told her. "I love it. Every inch of you." The birthmark was the most peculiar one I had ever seen.

I opened the door to my car and walked around to open the door for her. I took my hand to help her out and headed for the stairs. As we walked up the stairs, we held hands, neither one of us willing to let go.

"Hunter?" I squeezed her hand in comfort, feeling a slight tremble.

"Yes?"

"I remembered something last night." I glanced at her as we climbed stairs to our floor. "Were we ever in a helicopter together?" She tucked a long strand of her red hair behind her ear with her free hand, her eyes searching my face.

I never paused my step. "Yes, when I got you, we left via helicopter."

"And you asked me to see my birthmark?"

Her memory was slowly but surely coming back. "Yes."

"Why?"

We kept climbing the stairs. I wasn't worried about running into anyone, since nobody but the two of us had

access to this staircase.

“Callahan told me about it, to make sure I checked for it,” I told her. “He wasn’t sure what state you’d be in. When I found you, I was-” I paused, unsure how much to say without revealing too much. “I got sidetracked. I was furious to see you so hurt and forgot to check for the birthmark.” It was the only time it had ever happened to me.

“Where was I?” I knew she was eager to just put it all together and start her healing process.

“Don’t force it, Vita Mia,” I told her. “Trust me on this.” We were on my floor now and I led her to the door. “I’m going to program your fingerprints to the door so you can go in and out as you want.”

I quickly programmed her fingerprints in and the door clicked open.

“I’ll show you around.” Last night and this morning, we pretty much saw the bedroom, bathroom, and the hallway. I gave her a tour of the place, her eyes soaking it all in.

“I thought I loved my apartment, but this is even better,” she breathed out. “Like a whole house in a building.”

“If you want to change anything, feel free.” She nodded but didn’t say anything. She was uncharacteristically quiet. “No regrets, I hope.”

Her head whipped my way. “No, none.”

“What’s the matter?” Something was bothering her, and I wanted to know what. I wanted it to come naturally to both of us - to confide in each other.

She exhaled deeply, her hands wrapping around my waist. She was much shorter than my six foot three, but she fit me perfectly.

“Promise you won’t laugh,” she muttered.

“I promise.”

“These memories, I worry they’ll break me.” Her voice was low and soft, her face buried in my chest, and fuck, my

heart hurt. Because she hurt. “Maybe I am not supposed to remember.” She cleared her throat uncomfortably.

I took her chin between my fingers and made her look at me. I suspected she didn’t do physical touch because of the trauma she underwent. Except she couldn’t remember it.

“Tell me,” I demanded in a soft voice.

“Before I ran into you, I couldn’t stand a man’s touch. I felt broken. Just broken, and now, I-” She wanted to look away but I wouldn’t let her. No hiding from each other. “I finally feel normal, and I worry if those memories come back, my mind would go to hell in a handbasket.”

I lowered my head and pressed my lips to her forehead. I wished I could take it all away and make her see herself the way I did. Strong, beautiful, and kind.

“You are *not* broken,” I told her with conviction. “You are strong. You were strong when I met you eleven years ago and you still are.” Her breath came out in a rush, as if she was holding it. “When Callahan came to me, I was lost. I fought my father, hated him, but I hated myself even more. Because I deemed myself worthless.” She blinked her eyes in confusion, and I forced myself to explain. “My mother’s last words were left on a blood stained piece of paper. She told me to be a worthy man. Worthy of a woman’s love. But with each year, I saw more and more of my father in me. I hated him for it, but I hated myself even more.”

Her palm came up to my cheek. Would she do it once she remembered it all?

“You are a good man, Hunter,” she murmured softly.

“I am a killer, Butterfly. I have been for a long time. It leaves a mark on the soul. I fought my father before the mission I took for Callahan, but it was you that gave me purpose.” Her eyes reflected confusion. “When I found you, something in me shifted. I found a purpose… my purpose… to stop all men that used vulnerable women, girls, boys, anyone. And it was you that kicked it all off.”

She was mine and I was hers. Eleven years ago, I might have saved her, but she also saved me. She set the course that my friends and I have been on for the past decade, rescuing women from the vicious trafficking business.

I never thought we'd see each other again, that she'd be my catalyst for a new life I desperately wanted. Two years ago, she made something inside of me restart. A dance and tentative kiss made my entire world fade and leave her in the center of my universe.

She was my woman. I'd have a family with her. Children. Happy life. All. I simply wanted it all with her.

"You know what you asked me eleven years ago before Luca and I left?"

Our eyes locked and she shook her head.

"You asked me to kill them all. And I fucking did." Her mouth parted. "All except one," I added.

Realization flashed on her face.

"Except for Marco," she whispered in a low voice.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

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CASSIO

It wasn't exactly the subject for our wedding night. But here we were, and it seemed to help to settle her worry. She wasn't broken, far from it. She was strong and resilient.

"I'm going to take a quick shower. Is that okay?"

I nodded. "I'm going to get some work done. I'll be in my office."

An hour later, I heard her clunking around the kitchen, but I remained at my desk. She knew where I was, and I wanted her to get used to the space here. She brought a few of her things up but all her stuff was still downstairs. There was no need to rush her. All that mattered was that she was here, with me.

A knock came at the door and I raised my eyes to find her head poking through the open door.

Her hair was wet, the unique smell that I associated only with her drifting through the air. She wore a bathrobe, one of mine, that pretty much swallowed her small frame. Yet, it felt right seeing her in it.

She cleared her throat and her cheeks turned light red. "Are you hungry for dinner?"

I grinned. "You are joking, right?"

She chuckled. “Yeah. That pizza was too much. Ummm, I made a fruit platter.” She flushed deep red, spreading down her neck, chest and disappearing into the robe. I eyed her, curious why she was blushing. “Want to do a movie and fruit?”

“Sure.” I stood up and reached her in three big strides.

The moment we entered the living room, I realized why she was blushing. The fruit platter was full of pineapples, strawberries, blackberries, and more pineapples.

Pineapples. Our encounter in Vegas.

Both of us sat down on the couch, I reached for the fresh pineapple with my fork and raised it to her soft mouth.

“Open,” I ordered. Her ocean blue eyes met mine and without hesitation, she obeyed. Her lips closed over the fork and my cock hardened. Jesus, even a simple innocent act like this had me losing my mind with this woman.

She chewed the fruit and swallowed. “I remember you don’t like sharing silverware,” I drawled. “This can be your fork.”

She chuckled. “Do you remember everything?”

“Only when it comes to you.”

“More pineapple?” I asked her, hunger in my eyes.

She nodded and I offered another forkful. After she was done chewing, she gave me a side glance, and I knew the next thing out of her mouth would be a smartass comment even before it came. “You haven’t had any pineapple,” she murmured teasingly.

Desire flared in her eyes and she gulped softly.

I didn’t miss a beat. I raised a forkful of pineapple and bit into it. Truthfully, I didn’t care for pineapple, but if she wanted me to eat them in truck loads, I would.

She reached for another forkful of pineapple, but I stopped her. Instead, I fed it to her and she obediently took it. It was sexy as fuck. She was independent and strong, yet she obeyed me without question.

We lasted three minutes before we rushed into the bedroom. My hand fisted into her hair and my mouth crashed down on her soft, ruby lips. She tasted just as sweet as always. As I devoured her, I knew this woman would be the death of my self-control.

But none of it mattered because she would be worth a thousand pains. Her curves fit my palms, like God created her just for me. Two years of watching her, craving her and it had all come down to this.

It was all worth it. For her, I'd wait lifetimes.

Áine's arms wrapped around my neck, her soft curves pliant against me. I pushed her against the wall and tightened my grip on her hair, angling her head so I could penetrate her mouth deeper. I needed all of her, to taste every inch of her sweet mouth.

Our kiss wasn't sweet. It was hard, demanding, possessive, and desperate. Years of pent-up need caught up to both of us. My brain warned me to go slow, but I was too far gone. Her little moans vibrated through me and straight to my cock.

I pinched her nipple through her robe and her back arched into me. "That's right baby," I rasped against my mouth. "Show me what you want."

"More." One word. A demand that I would definitely satisfy.

I hooked her legs around my waist and carried her to our bed.

Our bed. It sounded so damn right.

Placing her on it, her red hair spread across my pillow, I wanted nothing more than to bury myself inside her so deep. Her face was flushed with arousal and her ocean gaze hungry on me.

"Take off the robe," I ordered, taking a small step back. I didn't trust myself not to pounce on her.

She sat back up, then knelt on the bed, and in an agonizingly slow move discarded the robe. I hungrily

watched her body, and it took all my self-control not to reach out and touch her. Feel her soft skin under my rough palms.

Jesus fucking Christ. She was Aphrodite in the flesh. My grandfather insisted on taking me to church whenever I stayed with him. I obliged but couldn't quite find the religion. Yet now, looking at her, I found it.

"Panties."

Without a question, she got rid of her panties and resumed her kneeling position. I grabbed a chair and sat myself on it. Every time I touched her before, it was rushed; the lights dimmed. Our bodies hungry for each other. This time, I intended to savor it. Nice and long.

"Be a good girl and spread your thighs for me," I ordered. "Let me see what is mine."

She gasped, but I could smell her arousal. So fucking sweet. So fucking mine.

Her mouth parted, our gazes connected and her eyes glimmered with desire as she obeyed. Áine was fiercely independent, but as I watched her follow my command, she brought me to my knees. She was my heart. My everything.

"You are soaked," I groaned. My eyes feasted on her naked body like I was starved. I'd never get enough of her.

A small shiver rippled through her body. "Y-yes," she panted.

My eyes traveled over her slim legs, over her narrow waist, and caressed every inch of her with my eyes. My gaze dragged from her full breasts to her face. A deep blush bloomed on her face and across her body.

Fuck, I gritted my teeth, *I am rock hard*.

"Touch yourself," I rasped my demand. "Like you did when we talked on the phone."

A soft moan slipped past her lips but she didn't hesitate. Áine's one hand caressed her breasts, squeezing and pinching her nipple, while her other hand slid between her

legs. Her eyes remained locked on me as she rubbed her clit.

I couldn't take my gaze off her, devouring every move, every whimper she made as she fingered her pussy. I wanted to know exactly what she liked, make her crave me as I craved her. Her breaths turned shallow, her mouth open and her eyes hazed with lust.

Mine.

The word seared into my brain, my heart and my soul. My fists clenched at the thought of anyone seeing her or touching her.

"Who are you thinking of?" I asked in a smooth tone.

"You." Fucking right!

Her arousal fragranced the air and I was getting high on it. The slick sounds of her fingers sliding in and out of her pussy echoed through the room. She was close. I could tell by her deepened flush, her hazed look, and her mouth slightly agape.

"Are you thinking about my hard cock inside your tight cunt? Or are you thinking about me tongue fucking that tasty little pussy until you come all over my face?"

Still on her knees, her thighs trembled, a soft whimper left her lips and her fingers worked faster at my filthy questions. Her eyes fluttered, an expression of bliss on her face.

I couldn't stay away anymore. I stalked to the bed and grasped her chin in my hand, forcing her to look at me.

"Answer. Me."

"Both," she gasped. "I want your mouth on me and then I want you filling me with your cock."

Fuck.

I gripped her wrist and forced her to stop fingering herself.

"Hunter," she protested on a soft whine. "Please."

"Have you thought about me since Vegas?" I growled, her eyes hazed with lust. She whimpered in protest. "Tell

me," I demanded.

"Yes," she panted. "All the time."

I pushed her down on the bed, pulling my tie off in one swift move, then pinning her wrists above her head and tying them together.

"W-what are you doing?" A flash of fear entered her eyes and something clenched inside my chest.

I lowered my head and stopped an inch from her mouth. My lips brushed against hers as I said, "I want to pleasure you until you beg me to stop." Pressing a soft kiss on her lips. "Want me to untie you?"

A mixture of trepidation and anticipation filled her face. She shook her head in answer, and I captured her mouth in another deep kiss. Then I trailed my mouth across her cheek.

"My brave woman," I murmured against her soft skin. Her strength made me want to pound my chest in pride. "If you want me to stop at any time," I rasped against her ear. "Just tell me and I will."

I moved my way down her neck, tasting her skin, nipping and leaving marks. I wanted to mark her so the entire world knew she was mine. When I reached her breasts, I sucked on her nipples, then gently bit it and a loud moan slipped past her lips.

"Hunter," she begged. "I need… I need…"

Her back arched off the bed, her wrists tugging on the binding.

"Tell me," I groaned. "Tell me what you need and it's yours."

I tugged on her nipple with my teeth while I pushed one finger inside her. *Sweet Jesus, she is tight.* Tight and drenched.

I kissed my way down her soft stomach, tasting her skin as I pushed my finger deeper inside her before pulling it out, then thrust again.

"Butterfly, tell me what you need."

“Please,” she moaned. “I need to come.”

I lifted my head and those gorgeous blue eyes shone with unadulterated desire. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

“You will,” I promised, lowering my head and inhaling deeply. Her sweet smell was addictive. I gently scraped my teeth over her clit, then sucked on it and Áine bucked. I lapped at her juices as she ground against my face, her movements jerky and frantic.

“Please, please,” she chanted. “Oh my fucking God. Yes!”

Her pleading whines grew louder and her movements desperate as I continued fingering her. I pressed my thumb against her clit and curled my finger inside her hitting her spot.

“Come for me,” I demanded in a hoarse voice.

A sharp cry left her mouth and her body arched off the bed, trembling underneath me. The sight of her orgasming was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

The bulge in my pants was so hard, it fucking hurt. I untied her and rubbed her wrists softly with my rough palms. She lay sated and relaxed on the bed. I wanted to bury myself inside her and fuck her into oblivion. Turned out, my grandfather’s preaching stuck deeper than I thought. Our wedding night made this lovemaking, not fucking.

“Hunter,” she called out softly. “I-I want you to-”

Her voice wavered. God, she couldn’t know how bad I wanted her. My cock was marble hard.

My hand gripped her nape and I pulled her closer to me. “I want to bury myself into your tight cunt,” I groaned. An attractive blush colored her cheeks. “But first I’m going to worship you.”

I took her mouth harshly, losing all my senses in her sweetness. This woman robbed me of everything - my control, my reason, my harshness.

Her lips trailed against my cheek, her nails sunk into my skin. I sucked in a breath, teetering on the edge of self-control. Her hunger for me fed my own.

I needed her desperately.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

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ÁINE

I fell asleep with my head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat and his fingers caressing my back. With each strong heartbeat, I fell deeper and deeper into dreams where I felt nothing but *him*.

And the memories buried in the fog.

"Just say a word and her torture ends." I've come to hate his taunting voice. His menacing grimace. His menacing cruelty. I had never hated, yet what I felt since these men had taken me was pure hate. Fire burned in my lungs, wrath choked me. "Just." Thrust. "One." Thrust. "Word."

My body shook. The school uniform I wore when I was kidnapped was filthy. Blood stains. Dirt. Fluids. This sick man liked to smear his cum all over my clothes after he was done with them.

Them. The women. The poor souls. If only I wasn't such a coward. I should save them. Say ***the*** *word.*

Bile in my throat mixed with rage, and rubbed my throat raw. So raw that I tasted blood.

I hated men. They were filthy, disgusting animals. My whole body ached, my eyes burned, but I couldn't feel the tears anymore.

Only blood. In my nostrils. In my mouth. On my tongue. Pulsing in my brain.

“D-don’t c-cry.” The woman’s whimpered, broken up whisper pierced through the fog of hate. Her body jerked with each grunt and thrust, as my body shook like a leaf in the wind. I didn't realize I was crying. There had been so much of it; it became natural, like breathing. Her black hair dragged over the dirty floor, her one cheek I could see was swollen, a purple bruise and an ugly gash. “I-it’s,” her body jerked with each rough pound, “... okay.”

It wasn’t okay. None of this was. It wasn’t okay he was punishing them to get a word out of me. This sick bastard, Marco motherfucking King, wanted a single word to slip through my lips so he could bypass the older guy. I assumed it was his father who ordered him not to touch me.

'You can't break her in,' were the old man's exact words. ‘Not unless she gives you a word. That one is a hard headed mule.’

Suddenly the movements stopped and my eyes snapped up just in time to see his hand fly through the air and slap the woman. Hard. No, not slap. Punch her. He punched her so hard I thought I heard a bone crack.

“Did I give you permission to talk?” he bellowed like a lunatic. Another punch followed and I flinched. I didn’t want to see more of this. Of the despicable torture these man put those weaker than them through. It wasn't fair; it wasn’t right. They should suffer.

I opened my mouth to stop him from landing another punch when pounding on the door stopped him. And me from saying ***the word****.*

“I said nobody is to bother us,” he screamed like a lunatic.

“Amir says your helicopter is here,” a deep man’s voice sounded. “With your father.”

I barely blinked and Marco was pulling up his pants and striding towards the door. But not before he slapped me hard across the face.

"Stupid bitch," he hissed. "I wonder if maybe you are mute and stupid."

He disappeared through the door, and I rushed towards the woman. I didn't know what I was doing, how to help her. I lifted her upper body up, my eyes darting to her open, exposed thighs.

A shuddered breath escaped me as I saw blood there. Blood and mixture of disgusting fluid by those men. Her thighs were bruised too. There were four before Marco King. I had to watch them all.

A wretched sob escaped me, and I buried my head into the woman's hair. It smelled awful, but it was better than everything else here. I should help her, take care of her, and yet all I felt were sobs shaking my body.

We'd never get out of here.

"It's okay," a firm voice came through the fog.

"He'll be back," I rasped. My lips felt dry and cracked, just like they were all those years ago and each beat of my heart hurt my chest. I inhaled deeply, expecting the stench of blood and dirt in my lungs. Instead, the scent of the ocean and deep woods invaded my lungs.

"And I'll be here." The deep, calming voice assured me. "We'll get him." Sleep pulled me deeper, my breathing slowing down. "Together." The last word was whispered so low, I wasn't sure whether I dreamt it or not.

I HEARD THE VOICES IN THE DISTANCE. FAMILIAR VOICES. SMELL of coffee. Shuffling of paper. Warmth on my face. Scent of the man that made my chest glow.

My eyes slowly came open and my hand sprawled to the right of me. *Empty bed*. Turning my head to the right, it was as if I didn't trust my senses. But yes, the bed was empty. My eyes darted to the clock on the nightstand. It was past eight o'clock. I couldn't remember the last time I slept in so late.

I yawned and stretched, mentally going through my work schedule. I had my first meeting at ten. It gave me enough time to get showered and ready. But first… coffee.

Walking over to the dresser, I searched for something to wear and found Hunter's button down shirt. All my clothes were still in my apartment downstairs so I'd just have to make do with this for now. After I brushed my teeth and washed my face, I went in search of coffee. I would need it today for sure. My bare feet were silent against the plush rug.

I peeked from room to room, unsure where I'd find Hunter. I was certain someone else was here. The question was who. My eyes glanced at my left hand and my heart fluttered. My wedding band was still there.

Mrs. Áine King.

It came with complications. The biggest one being his half-brother and his human trafficking. The longer I went without Dr. Taylor, the more I remembered. And surprisingly, it didn't shatter me.

We'll get him. Together.

I was certain under the light of a new, bright day that I heard Hunter say that. I believed him. I couldn't remember everything but just broken pieces of his rescue. His hand, a few words. He saved me from Marco King, and now we'd kill him. *Together.*

I peeked into another room, which I knew Hunter used for his office. It was empty. I really loved this room. It faced the south side and one whole one wall was floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the city skyline. I couldn't resist

walking in, nearing the window. As I stood there, the sun warmed me through the windows.

Spring was here. The season always made me feel hopeful. More time outdoors, more sunshine, more of something that felt good. And this time around with Hunter, the feeling was even stronger.

A beep had me turning towards the desk. It was neat, nothing on it but a single laptop. Curious to know what caused the beep, I sat in his chair and glanced at the open screen, surprised to see it unlocked.

But then, Hunter probably wasn't expecting anyone in his office.

My eyes skimmed over the words, and with each word read, my heart sped up another notch. The email was from Nico Morrelli, Bianca's husband. I swallowed the knot in my throat, the words dancing across the screen.

Marco is on the move. They tried to get Bianca when she was on her way to the women's shelter with Gia. Everyone is good, except for the fuckers that tried to take my family.

Belles auction is set to happen in the next few days according to the one we captured. No information on the place or exact time. Though all the hints lead me to believe it will happen within the next week, in Turkey. One piece of information has been confirmed over and over again. Marco will host the auction personally.

Keep a close eye on Áine. Marco has offered a special prize for anyone that brings her in. Chad Stewart is funding it. The sick bastard prefers his women compliant and limp, his exact words.

Luciano moved his family to the shelter.

My eyes darted across the screen again, my stomach roiling at the images with Marco and Chad. I knew from Cassio's initial report that Marco worked with Chad. Yet, it was so hard for me to believe that I missed it. He even fooled Callahan. Fucking Chad, the state's attorney who was supposed to stand up for innocent and seek justice. No wonder Hunter fucking hated his guts. Hunter must have known all along.

As if I was watching a movie in slow motion, my mind formed a plan.

I stood up, ensuring the chair was left in the exact same position I found it in. I wouldn't put it past my husband to notice every little discrepancy. I snuck out of the room and headed for the large kitchen next. Low voices drifted from it and it was exactly where I found my husband.

The second I stepped into the kitchen, the talk stopped. My husband and Luca sat at the table, looking fresh and ready for another day. Both their eyes were glued to Hunter's phone. It looked like they were studying a map.

"Morning." Hunter's deep voice warmed me from the inside.

"Morning," I mumbled, my voice still a bit morning raspy. He reached out for my hand and pulled me over to him. I landed on his lap. "Is that my coffee?" I asked, eyeing the third cup next to Hunter's.

"It is, and still warm. I heard you walking around so I just got it ready."

Yep, I was a total mush for my husband.

I took the mug with both of my hands. "Thank you," I murmured against the mug as I took a sip, the warm liquid sneaking down my throat. "I have to go to work."

"You can work from home." Hunter's immediate reply didn't surprise me.

"I haven't been in the office for the past three days."

"Don't worry, sister-in-law," Luca chimed in, completely at ease with me. "You're the boss now."

I rolled my eyes. “No, I’m not. But I guess it is good to have friends in high places,” I added dryly. “However, regardless that Cassio owns the company, I cannot just ditch going into my office,” I resolved.

“Yes, you can.” Hunter’s voice was low in my ear, his hand squeezing my thigh. “It’s our honeymoon.”

He got me there. “I have a meeting I cannot miss,” I told him. “Just because I’m sleeping with the boss doesn’t give me a break from my responsibilities.”

He gently squeezed my thigh. “It’s your company. I only bought it because you worked there. And Nico will be happy if you are running it.” He pretended to be distressed while his eyes twinkled with amusement. “He says my questions are stupid and not even worth his time to bill me.”

I feigned an insult on his behalf. “I will have to deal with him. Can’t he appreciate your mobster skills?”

His booming laugh, low and raspy, had my lips curving into a grin. God, I loved hearing him laugh. I snuggled closer to him, his hand warming my inner thigh.

“Work from home today.” Hunter didn’t get sidetracked easily. I had no doubt it was because of the suspicious attack on Bianca. It made me wonder exactly what she went through for her husband. He must have anticipated the attack and luckily had tight security on his family. And the belles arrangement, what kind of bullshit was that?

“Well, at least you don’t mind the mobster skills,” Luca grumbled, stirring my thoughts back to the present, unaware of Hunter’s hand on my thigh, inching closer and closer to my sweet spot.

I glared at my husband, warning him not to start that now. Not with his brother at the kitchen table and he chuckled, deep and soft. His laugh did something to my insides, made me melt or glow. Something.

“Why would I mind?” I questioned Luca. “It would be hypocritical considering who Callahan is.”

Luca grumbled something about family minding it and then got back to his phone and the world map.

“You guys checking out the world map?” I asked, swiftly switching the subject. “Or do you have information on the next event your half-brother is conjuring?”

Both their eyes, so similar in color and shape, snapped to me.

“Do you have information?” Luca questioned me.

“On who?” I asked innocently.

“Who are you talking about, wife?” Hunter asked.

I raised my eyebrow. “And who are you talking about, Cassio?”

A crease showed up between his eyebrows. He really didn’t like me calling him Cassio. I sort of decided I would call him Cassio in public and Hunter when we were alone. Though, my husband didn’t seem thrilled with it.

When he didn’t answer, I blew lightly into my coffee, the steam coming off of it swirling in the air. There was one thing my husband would have to learn. He couldn’t protect me by not sharing information with me.

“Did you know Chad had a place in upstate New York?” I murmured seemingly offhand. “Under his stepsister’s name.”

“He does?” Luca bit right away.

“Yeah. Everyone thinks it belongs to her but it is his.” I blew another air into my coffee. “She owed him a favor, so she allowed him to use her name to get it. There are only three people that know about it. Well, five now.”

“How do you know?” Hunter’s voice was slightly suspicious.

I shrugged. “He invited me up there once, so I looked into it. He didn’t say he owned it, but he is the only one that goes there.” Chad let it slip a while back that he paid for it. I found it odd that it was in his sister’s name, but if he needed a place to hide, it made sense. “Chad’s money was used to purchase it.”

I pretended not to see the glance those two shared.

They'd hunt the crooked attorney. I'd hunt their half-brother.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

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CASSIO

I felt slightly guilty at asking Áine to remain at home while I intended to go to upstate New York. But not enough to tell her why. The nightmares she had didn’t need to continue during the daytime. We had Chad's location and soon we'd have the location to Marco. After all, if Chad was participating in the agreement, he would have received the invitation.

“I need to swing by my place to get my clothes, and I have some work to do.” With a coffee mug in her hands, she walked towards the window, watching the city. The sunlight coming through the windows hit just right, highlighting the different shades of dark merlot, bright scarlet, and those tones in her hair that glowed between the two. She seemed too accepting of staying and working from home and something nagged at me, but I didn’t want to question her. There would have to be trust between us and starting it by being suspicious at her easy surrender wasn’t the way to kickstart our marriage.

I watched her slim fingers with the wedding band wrapped around the mug.

“Good thing it is only downstairs,” Luca commented.

She smiled. “Totally convenient.” Her eyes shifted back to me. “I’m going to have Margaret come and keep me

company if that's okay." I cocked my eyebrow. Áine wasn't the type to ask permission. She must have realized the same because she quickly added, "I'm sure you have security all around. I just don't want them to give her a hard time."

I nodded. "I'll tell my men."

"Where are they anyhow?" she asked, blowing the steam off her coffee, gazing out the window. She looked at home in my place, with my shirt on her.

"You're safe here," I told her. "I have men in the garage, our private entrance, and on the roof."

Her blue eyes glanced my way, a smile on her face. Why did I just feel tricked? "That's good. Just tell them to make sure Margaret can come and go safely."

An hour later, I left Áine in her apartment.

"Stay here until I'm back," I instructed.

She arched her perfect eyebrow. "Where else would I be, Cassio?"

I should have known better.

WE FOUND THE HOUSE.

Sure as shit, it looked like someone was staying here. Hiding was more likely. Alessio met us ten miles out. He was closer to Upstate New York since he lived in Canada. He ruled the Canadian East Coast. Though sometimes I wondered if he'd stay in the *business*. The only reason he'd ever get out was for a woman. A very specific woman that happened to fight everything we did - drug smuggling, arms dealing, and of course, human trafficking which we didn't do.

The three of us took our spots in the thick coverage of pines, at the edge of the woods about twenty feet from the

home. A picturesque, white farmhouse sat in the middle of the lawn, overlooking a lake.

“Charming little place,” Alessio muttered. “His retirement home?”

“The fucked up state’s attorney continues his ‘*I’m normal’* ruse,” Luca snickered.

I spotted a barn in the back that looked connected to the house.

“Luca, do a scan and see if there is a way to enter the house from that barn,” I told him in a hushed tone.

Luca was on it before I finished the statement. Going through the front door would leave us too open. Barn seemed a much more viable option.

“There is a doorway from the barn into the house,” Luca finally announced, his eyes scanning his phone screen. Without another word or delay, we quietly moved towards it. We stuck to the shadows of the trees. Once we were by it, I pressed gently against the door, and with a low squeal, it opened.

The barn was being used as a garage. Bingo! One car. Registered to the one and only New York City State’s Attorney, Chad Stewart.

Boo, motherfucker!

We slipped through the side door into the barn and entered a hallway. It was midday but this side of the house had no windows so daylight didn’t come through. We had to let our eyes adjust.

The creak of a floorboard upstairs drew my attention. Sharing a glance with Luca and Alessio, we decided to split up. Luca and Alessio downstairs, while I made my way to the side staircase. I kept my steps light and silent. You never knew with old homes which damn floorboard would make a sound.

Squeak. Like fucking now.

I paused my step, waiting for any signs that I was discovered. More shuffling upstairs, the movement

unperturbed, which told me I wasn't heard. Knowing Chad Steward, the fucker thought he was untouchable here.

The sound of the water filled the silence and the old pipes in the house clanked as it was forced through them. He must be getting in the shower. How lovely, I get to see him butt-ass naked. I waited another second, then continued making my way up. He wouldn't be able to hear a thing with the shower on.

I reached the top of the stairs and waited. Patience was, after all, my virtue. I waited a long time for Áine, five minutes for this sick fucker wouldn't make a difference. As his shower ended, I waited silently against the wall outside the room. In my position, he wouldn't see me when he came out, and I could slice his neck in one swift move.

But I had other plans. Questions that needed answers.

Just as he walked through the door with a towel around his waist, my hand reached out swiftly, the blade of my knife pressed against his throat.

"Don't move, motherfucker," I hissed in a low voice. His head jerked backwards, and I shoved my elbow into his back, making him fall onto his knees. The thump of his knees against the wood flooring echoed through the old house. "Which part of *don't move* don't you understand?"

He instantly stilled. Slow learner that one. Not sure how in the hell he became the distinguished state's attorney. I could hear Luca's and Alessio's boots behind me, rushing up the stairs. They'd probably fall through the damn wood with their big frames.

"P-please, don't hurt me." His voice was full of terror. I felt no pity for him, only rage knowing what his plans for Áine were. My wife.

"Don't worry," I said quietly, eerily. "We won't give you the same fate you planned for my wife."

His head whipped back and he paled when he saw me, his eyes wide with terror. A flicker of recognition flashed in

his dilated pupils. His nostrils flared but he quickly got himself together.

Luca and Alessio joined us.

“Tie him up, Luca,” I ordered my little brother.

“Fucking bullshit,” Luca spat out. “Why couldn’t you wait until the fucker at least put some clothes on?”

I could see it in Chad’s eyes before he even moved. He launched at me, probably hoping to tackle me to the floor. My knife slammed into his shoulder and a bloodcurdling scream erupted from him, as the towel slid off his hips, leaving him naked as the day he was born. How convenient, he would die naked too!

“Try something stupid one more time,” I hissed, twisting the blade buried in his shoulder, “and I’ll listen to your screams all night.”

I ripped the knife out and he planted into the wall behind me, his face hitting the picture frame.

“Okay, barefoot princess,” Luca grabbed him by his hair. “Let’s tie you up. Touch me with that dick, and it will be the first thing I slice off you.”

Luca sat him in the wooden chair. The fear wafting from him was almost tangible. His body was rigid as Alessio held him at gunpoint. Pulling the wire from his back pocket, Luca tied-twisted it around his feet, before moving up to his wrist and then mid-torso. The wire cut into his skin as he whimpered each time Luca pulled it a bit tighter. I reveled in the sounds he made. I'd make sure he'd never hurt another woman. I could only imagine the number of women Marco had gifted him since their agreement had been made. The number of women he'd hurt, fucked, used and abused before discarding them like trash. This wasn't just for Áine, it was for all of them.

“You can dish it but can’t take it, huh?” I taunted menacingly. This was what our father raised us to do, torture to extract information and then dispose of the body, never to be found again.

I was putting my skills to good use.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

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ÁINE

The doorbell had me running to answer it. The second I opened it, I noted two of Cassio's men, one on the left side and other on the right guarding the exits of the public hallway. Margaret stood there in her loud pink raincoat, though the skies were clear. Who in the hell knew why she wore a raincoat! Maybe the weather called for rain later.

I quickly pulled Margaret inside and shut the door.

"That happy to see me, huh?" she teased.

"Thrilled," I retorted, hugging her tightly. "I need your help."

No sense in wasting time. The more headway I got, the better I was.

Her gaze met mine. "Tell me what you need."

"I need you to stay here," I told her. "Make a little noise, move around, pretend we are talking."

She eyed me like I was crazy. "We are talking."

"I have to leave," I retorted dryly in a hushed tone. "I read Cassio's email from Nico. Marco's men are looking for me. Remember the belles arrangement that Bianca mentioned?" She nodded. "Nico thinks the auction will happen within the next week. In Turkey. So no more hunting. I'll let him catch me."

One breath. Two breaths.

“Are you fucking nuts?” she hissed, her eyes darting around like there was someone lurking in the corner.

“No, I’m not. But I know Cassio has a tracker on my wedding band,” I told her, showing her my wedding band.

“How do you know?” She eyed my wedding band. There was nothing unusual about it, not even a diamond. Hunter knew I wanted a plain wedding band and he delivered, though he omitted the information on the tracker. But in his defense, all the plans kind of spiraled.

I slid it off my finger and pointed to the inner band. “It’s right in there.”

“Aren’t you pissed off at him?” she questioned me, her eyes eyeing the band. “I’d fucking kill him.”

I shrugged. “No, I’m not mad at him. He just wants to keep me safe.” Like he always had. “Anyhow, he can track me. He and Luca will probably be back soon. If he notices I am on the move, he’ll come after me even sooner. Until then, I won’t be alone. John and the crew will be with me. John has an approximate location for Marco.”

“I don’t like this plan,” she muttered begrudgingly. “If something happens, it will be my head. And I’m already on the shit list.”

“Nothing will happen,” I assured her, something I had no business promising. “But I can’t be a sitting duck.”

I strode into my spare bedroom, Maggie behind me. I had no time to waste. In a rush, I changed into my combat clothes. Black tight pants, black shirt, knife holster, gun holster, combat boots.

“I don’t know, Áine,” Margaret tried again. “This sounds reckless.”

“They tried to get Bianca,” I told her in a low voice. “Other women too, I am sure. If they want me, let them come and get me. They won’t expect *me*. I’m stronger than I was before.”

Her eyebrow scrunched and I silently cursed myself. I slipped. “What do you mean?” she inquired. “You make it sound like you have been captured before.”

Fuck. I didn’t need this slip up now. “I’ll explain later,” I promised. “I have no time to waste right now.”

She pushed her hand through her hair. “I know I won’t be able to dissuade you. When you get like this, you just plow through.”

I smiled, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “Thank you.”

“Well, I owe you since you married Cassio King because of me,” she grunted, rolling her eyes.

I chuckled. “I like him,” I admitted with a smile. “A lot.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “Like in love like him?”

In love. Yes, I loved him. It has been a whirlwind, and I never truly thought that deep into it. If this wasn’t love, it felt peculiarly close to it. Something about the way he cared, how my heart and body felt safe and at ease around him. Maybe I loved him for a long time, I just never recognized it. Either way, I was Hunter’s. Always and forever.

“Yeah,” I grinned. “Like in love with him.”

I just had to survive this shitstorm and then we’d focus on each other.

“Whoa, I didn’t see that one coming,” she murmured. “How do you know?”

I shrugged. “He makes me feel safe, protected. I feel more at ease with him than anyone else. And I feel like he understands me. Like really understands me.”

“He isn’t pierced, right?” The question came out of nowhere and I blinked in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“Ummm, down there,” she mumbled. “Is he pierced down there?” When I just continued staring, she continued. “Is his dick pierced, Áine? Why do you make me spell it out?”

A strangled laugh escaped me. “No, it’s not. Why?”

“Oh, no matter.”

I shook my head in disbelief. I’d question her about it, but I didn’t have time for it now. “We’ll talk about it when I get back,” I told her, my curiosity peaked. Who wouldn’t be curious about a pierced dick?

“Okay, so how will you sneak out?” she asked.

Cassio didn’t have anyone watching those stairs, not until the garage. I pulled up my phone and sent a short message to John, asking for his status.

“I’ll take the private staircase,” I told her. “Then instead of going through the garage, I’ll go through the lobby, straight out the door, and into the car. John will be waiting for me.”

She slipped her raincoat off and offered it. “Here, wear this in case you run into any of the guards.”

I eyed it suspiciously. “I don’t have time to color my hair black right now.”

Rolling her eyes, she chuckled. “Put the hood on. Your hair is pulled up into a ponytail anyhow, so as long as you keep it over your forehead, they’ll never know it is you.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. As I put it on, I couldn’t resist. “Why did you wear a raincoat?” My eyes darted to the windows still reflecting a bright sunny day.

“My mood was kind of rainy,” she muttered, her shoulders slumping. “I don’t know. Somehow it felt like my life as I knew it was over, and I needed something to cheer me up.”

I frowned. “So you wore a raincoat?”

She shrugged. “The bright color makes me happy.”

“Oh.” Yeah, Margaret would be a moody pregnant woman. I’d buy all the brightest cupcakes, clothes and umbrellas in the city to keep her happy.

“Okay, enough about me,” she grinned, though it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “You better be safe and watch your back.” I nodded, pressing a kiss on her cheek.

“I will. I promise.” Another hug and I had to get going.

As I slipped through the back door, I rushed down the stairs, my heart thundering with every step, almost expecting to run into Hunter at any moment. When I reached the last landing, I took a deep breath, my hand lingering on the doorknob. The main building lobby was where I could run into someone. I pulled the hood further over my forehead, just in case. I opened the door and almost plowed straight into one of Cassio's guards.

Keeping my hood on, I diverted my eyes to the ground and sidestepped him, rushing through the lobby and out the door into the fresh air. John was already there waiting in the car. Without delay, I strode towards it, opened the door, and threw myself into the passenger seat.

“Go,” I breathed out.

Without a question, he shifted into a drive and sped down the road. “Thanks for getting the crew together on such short notice,” I broke the silence.

He flicked his eyes my way, then returned them onto the road. “You’re the boss.”

If he looked at me, he would have caught me rolling my eyes. “This is a team effort,” I muttered. “I don’t think of The Rose Rescue as just mine. It is all of ours. We are all doing it for one reason or another.”

I learned through the years that John lost his daughter to human traffickers. One day, they snatched her on her way home from school, never to be seen again. In every rescue mission, he searched for her. He didn’t say it, but he didn’t have to.

“Then I should warn you,” he said, his tone revealing none of his thoughts. “The boys are not happy about your plan.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear that, but they’d have to deal with it. “The main thing is that you guys are not far behind. We have been going after him for years and never got close to him. This way, he can believe he got me.”

Coming to a screeching halt, John pulled up into a parking spot. Both of us got out of the car and ran through the private gates of the airport. With a private jet there were less security protocols and we were able to reach the plane within ten minutes.

Pilot, a nickname for one of my crew members, was waiting for us at the bottom of the plane, leaned against the rails, looking every bit like an arrogant asshole. Margaret and he hooked up a few years back and both immediately realized their mistake. Working together and sleeping together caused complications that neither one of them wanted.

“Áine,” he greeted me. “Next time give us more notice. I was in the middle of getting laid.”

“TMI,” I retorted dryly, and when he raised an eyebrow in question, not understanding the reference, I added, “Too much information.”

He just rolled his eyes. “Okay, let’s not waste a good day. Off into the plane.”

“Asshole,” I muttered under my breath. The moment we were inside, the hustling started. Pilot went straight into his cabin, the rest of us taking our seats.

As I buckled myself into the seat before the takeoff, my thoughts wandered to my husband. My guess would be that he found Chad and would probably kill him. Maybe something was wrong with me, but I hoped he’d make him scream. Make him suffer, give him exactly what he planned for me. I was sick and tired of men that thought they could do whatever they wanted to women, to those weaker than them.

I pushed the button on the table next to me that rang directly into the pilot’s cabin.

“We are ready,” I announced.

“What do we have, John?” I asked him as the plane took off.

Turkey. My nightmare started in Turkey, and it would seem my nightmare would end there too. Bits and pieces of tapped memory kept trickling in, and I knew without a doubt it was in Turkey where it all started. It was in Turkey where I ran into Marco King.

“The information you gave helped me narrow it down to Turkey,” he started. He was referring to the information I got from Nico’s email. “There is a specific area in Turkey that seems to have a lot of traffic. It is right by the Armenian border.”

John was able to find a vague geographical area where another one of Marco’s compounds were. We’d spend the night in the nearest city and tomorrow head for the remote part of this country, where people like Marco King flew under the radar and shipped women like animals. Treated them even worse.

The Armenia-Turkey border ran from Georgia in the north to the tripoint with Azerbaijan in the south. Almost two hundred miles of the border had been closed since 1993. But that didn’t stop smugglers and people like Marco King.

The flight was long, or maybe it just seemed long because it felt like a trip back to the past. The past that I couldn’t quite remember in full but knew would hurt. I kept glancing at my phone, almost expecting to see a message from Hunter.

It never came.

When we landed in the private airport in Kars, it was almost eight at night. The city situated by Kars River was near the border with Armenia. Even as the dusk covered the city, the charm of it couldn't be denied. Though the dread of being so close to our final destination was terrifying.

And it didn’t help that I missed Hunter. We’ve been married barely a day and here I was on the other side of

the world. With an ocean between us, it felt like I hadn't seen my husband in way too long. Hours felt like days.

"I booked us a hotel," John said. "It is late, and you look like you'll fall off your feet at any moment. Married life must suit you."

"Funny," I grumbled. This wasn't a normal kickstart to a marriage. But this was important, and if I was right, I believed Hunter would come after me. Maybe we could get rid of Marco once and for all.

We arrived at a small, charming hotel with bright pink colors at the outskirts of the city. The façade was charming and the second we stepped out of the car, I soaked in the view. The hotel overlooked the entire city, the view mesmerizing. The city dated back to the ninth century and there was something captivating to think someone stood at this very spot, watching over this land, for over a thousand years.

It would actually be a charming spot for a romantic weekend getaway. Maybe a honeymoon.

How was it possible to miss him so much already?

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

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CASSIO

The moment I opened the door to Áine's apartment, I knew something was wrong. The scent was off. Then I saw Margaret, seated on the couch, her feet propped up on the coffee table, watching soaps.

Fucking soaps! She was so engrossed into it, she didn't hear us enter. Alessio, Luca, and I stood watching her laugh at some dumb joke.

"Where is my wife?" I barked out and she startled, jumping up to her feet.

"What the fuck?" she muttered. "This is not your apartment, you know."

"Where. Is. My. Wife?" I gritted.

Chad sang like a canary.

By the time I was done with him, his face was black and blue, his eyes swollen shut. There wasn't a single brave bone in that motherfucker. Not like my butterfly.

"Enough," he begged, crocodile tears pouring down his ugly face. "I told you everything."

He cried like a baby. The image of Áine, the day I saved her, flashed in my mind. She didn't cry like a baby when she saw me. Though her shattered blue gaze hurt like a sonofabitch.

The pictures in the prick's nightstand told a story of many girls, just like Áine. Beaten. Bruised faces. Shattered eyes. The prick got off on their pain.

The anger inside me boiled but I wanted to make him suffer. Days, months, years of his suffering wouldn't make up for everything he'd done. So I settled for pulling his nail clean off, relishing in his screams. His scream did nothing to settle my anger. So I pulled another. And another. There was something satisfying in seeing his fingers bleeding, the raw flesh where his nails used to be.

Maybe I could peel his skin off too, I mused. That would make him suffer a bit more. Unless he passed out. Fuck, I should have brought smelling salts.

"I wonder if I should do the toes too," I muttered, as if thinking out loud. Not that I would ever get that close to him. Filthy sicko.

The fucker actual pissed himself. The sound of running piss all over the floor and the stench of urine filling the air. The state's attorney was still naked, much to Luca's dismay.

"Fuck," Alessio grunted, his voice cold and hard. "I really don't want to be smelling like piss. Kill him already."

"I really don't want to be seeing his sorry ass dick," Luca complained. "My eyes are hurting at this sight."

I shrugged. "We could cut it off."

Chad started screaming, his voice so high-pitched, it competed with bad opera singers.

"You shit yourself," Alessio warned, "And I'm slicing your throat."

"No, no," he begged. "I told you everything."

"Turkey is a big, fucking country," I said. "I'm afraid that I need more specifics. Not to worry, I have time." He didn't need to know otherwise. "We can get acquainted really ***well****."*

I grinned, probably looking like a fucking maniac. Not that I cared. I pressed the blade of my knife against his eyelid, then slowly pressed into it. The skin broke and

blood trickled out. My knife found itself pressing against his eyeball and his piercing scream threatened to deafen me.

Fuck, I didn't need that side effect right now. Pushing harder against it, his mouth finally spit out what I wanted to know.

"Kars," he wailed. "Kars in Turkey. Tomorrow."

Half a breath and my blade sliced his throat in one swift move. I watched him gurgle and choke on his blood, his eyes frantic as he realized death was coming for him.

It was better than he deserved.

So the auction was tomorrow. In Turkey. Kars! Too damn close to the place where we rescued Áine from all those years ago. My only comfort during the past few hours was knowing she was here, protected. I never thought to check on her using the tracking on my phone.

Margaret's eyes darted to Luca, then to Alessio, before returning to me. I clenched my fists, anger boiling inside me. If something happened to Áine, I'd lose my shit. Rage flickered through my skin, mixing with the fear of losing something I had only found. I waited for her my whole life.

My blood ran hot from the torture we just dished out and adrenaline pumped through my veins.

"Cassio, calm down." It was Luca's voice. I ignored him. The pressure in my chest, images of Áine's expression full of fear from eleven years ago played on repeat in my mind.

"Margaret, where is my wife?" I gritted, fury amplifying with each breath.

It didn't escape me that Luca stepped in front of me, using his body to shield her.

"I knew this was going to end badly," Margaret muttered.

"Tell us what you know," Luca demanded, before I could bellow at her for allowing any stupidity that could harm my wife. I knew well that Áine was stubborn and independent.

It wasn’t Margaret’s fault, but whoever maintained reason when worried for their wife’s life.

“She said you have a tracker on her wedding band,” she breathed out, worry etched on her face. “She’s gone to Turkey, with her team. To kill Marco.”

Fuck. Me.

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Chapter Forty

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ÁINE

Okay, in the grand scheme of things, this plan was stupid.

I woke up to a rough hand clamping over my mouth. Through the nightmare hazed brain, I couldn't distinguish between dream and reality. I started fighting back too late. Whoever it was already overpowered me by that point. I didn't stand a chance. He hurled me from the bed and forced me down onto the carpeted floor. My head hit the ground, taking the brunt of the fall. A cloudy haze of pain pierced through my body and my brain, but the physical pain wasn't the worst part.

It took a mere second and a strong hit to my head for all of it to come back. All of it. The screaming. Torture. Stench of urine, blood, dirt, and sex. The degradation of women in the worst way possible.

As all the memories rushed into my brain, I found myself wheezing and gasping, incapable of a single word. I never spoke a word during the tortures either.

Then the world turned pitch black.

I WOKE UP TO SILENCE AND THE SENSATION OF BEING WATCHED. Scratch that. Being leered at. Remaining still and keeping my breathing even, I bid for time while my heart raced under my chest.

As the fog in my brain slowly cleared, I realized it wasn't quiet.

Cries. Screams. Shouting.

Terror in each sound I heard, mirroring the one in my heart.

I could hear them somewhere in the distance, but still close enough to know I was in the same hell as those people.

Trying hard to calm down my racing heart and stop myself from freaking out, I waited and listened. I had to focus on the current room, the immediate threat.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I could smell the stale moisture in the air and something else. A scent, a cologne. The smell was familiar, nauseating. It brought a rush of unwanted images in my mind.

Marco King!

I kept my eyes closed, resisting the urge to open them. Refusing to meet the darkness and menacing in the gaze that haunted me in my nightmares. He was here: I'd stake my life on it. A deep breath that wasn't mine sounded too close for comfort.

*He **is** here.*

"I know you are awake." The voice sounded the same, cruel and arrogant.

Each thud of my heart was a physical punch to my chest. It hurt. *I'm not that little girl anymore*, I kept whispering in my mind. *I'm stronger*.

The frames of the bed protested in effort as I moved, forcing myself to sit up. My eyes traveled over the filthy bed, the walls were in no better shape, a cracked dirty sink in the corner with a bucket. I guessed the bucket was to relieve myself.

Breathe, I told myself silently. This four, stone wall cell was every woman's nightmare. It was creepy, hopeless, leaving you with a taste of terror on your lips.

Not this time. I refused. I'd never cower or hide from this man.

Slowly, as if preparing myself for the final scene of a nightmare, my eyes connected with the black combat boots. They were the cleanest and shiniest combat boots I have ever seen, which told me he wore them as a fashion statement. My own combat boots were scuffed up and messy as shit. I wished I had them on right now. Instead of wearing my pajama bottoms and a tank top. It made me feel exposed, vulnerable. I should have slept in my clothes with a knife sheathed in my boots, prepared.

Hindsight is a bitch.

Steeling myself for what I knew was coming, there was nothing that could prepare me for this very moment. Not years of training; not years of killing; not years of torture. My heart hammered against my ribs, making each breath I took painful. Just like those memories that assaulted my mind.

Ever so slowly, my eyes went over his chest and connected with his face. I had to work hard to keep from freaking out. To prevent a whimper from leaving my mouth. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

I could see the resemblance. Between Cassio, Luca, and Marco. They were Benito's sons. Nobody could deny that; one look at them and you saw the resemblance. Except, Luca and Cassio lacked the menacing cruelty that Marco breathed. He relished in it.

The same menacing, dark eyes met my gaze. If there was ever blackness to reflect in someone's soul, this was it. His eyes were windows to his tar-black soul. I wasn't particularly bloodthirsty, but I wanted to gouge his eyes out. Cut up his lips so he couldn't smile anymore.

A terrifying grin spread across his face. “Welcome,” he greeted me, his voice sending disgusting shivers down my spine. “You have turned into a beauty,” he commented. “I knew you would.”

He stood up and took two short steps to me then bent over, his fingers gripping my chin roughly.

“And those eyes,” he purred, his breath too close to me. His scent made me want to gag, the bile stuck in my throat. “Glimmering like oceans on a bright day with the flames of the sun dancing in your hair.”

Fucking poet this one.

Without thinking of repercussions, I spit in his face.

I offered him a sweet smile, but I refused to utter a single word. My gut feeling was telling me Marco got off on women’s terror and pain. I’d be damned if I offer that up willingly. If it was the last fucking thing I did, I’d die with a fake smile on my face, and not a single whimper from my mouth.

Before I could even take a breath, Marco charged me, slamming my head against the wall, his body on top of mine. My neck twisted at a weird angle, my head pushed against the wall, Marco’s body on top of mine, and I realized there was no usual panic from a man’s touch. My skin didn’t break out in hives, my breathing didn’t turn erratic. It was as if I was outside my body, watching the whole scene unfold without a care.

I relaxed my whole body, letting the fucker get all excited. He thought he overpowered me. It was exactly where I wanted him. He found me vulnerable; that was a big mistake on his part.

“Say a word,” he rasped. “One word.”

For a fraction of a second, my heart tripped, but I quickly willed it to stop. Panic had no room here right now. It would go south from there, and we were pretty fucking close to it already. I pressed my lips tight, exercising control.

“You know you like it.” He breathed into my neck, his mouth on my skin. I would need to shower in bleach to wash him off. Fucker! “One word,” he said, making my skin crawl with disgust.

His head was buried in the crook of my twisted neck, his stinky cologne way too close for comfort, but I ignored it all. I focused on my next step, kept my fear faded somewhere in the back of my mind.

His grunts of pleasure and hands on me made my stomach roil. He was hard, his hips pushing against me. As if he was humping me. The picture of a dog humping came to mind and a hysterical laugh bubbled in my throat. I had to be on the verge of insanity. The memories that rushed into my mind right before I was knocked out, this situation and events of the past week finally caught up to me.

He reached his hand between our bodies, fumbling with his belt and I found my window of opportunity. He was so far gone in his excitement, he never noticed my body shifted.

His head lifted, our eyes connected. There was a sick glimmer of excitement shining in his dark depths. It hit me right then. Luca and Cassio… my Hunter… my husband… those two were nothing like this sick fucker. Nothing!

The striking resemblance between Hunter, Luca, Marco, and their father started and ended in the physical appearance. The latter two were cruel, evil and sick. They actually enjoyed inflicting pain on women. Thrived in it even.

Hunter and Luca saved them. Respected them. Cared for them.

“Say a word.” He pulled his dick out and I scrunched my nose. Must be the ugliest dick on this planet. In one swift move, I shoved my knee with all my strength into his pitiful jewels.

His bellowed wail almost deafened me, his entire body hunching over. I pushed him off of me, watching him fall

like a stiff, wooden board onto the ground. It was almost comical.

I jumped to my feet, my bare feet against the dirty floor. Lowering my gaze, I watched him impassively. It was where this asshole belonged. His face smashed against the filthy, piss stained floor.

The rumors are true, I mused. It would seem hitting a man in his groin was extremely painful.

“Fucker.” I let the word come out loud and clear, but he couldn’t even register it from the pain in his groin. So I flung my bare foot against his face. “Here is your one word.”

I squatted down, his gaze barely tracking my movement. His eyes were unfocused. I grinned coldly.

“You wanted me to talk, motherfucker. Well, here I am. *Talking.”* The look on his face said it all. Realization that maybe, *just maybe*, I was crazy.

The screams of the women he tortured, cut, and fucked were louder than ever in my brain. Those images would be ingrained in me for the rest of my life. Those women would be scarred, physically and mentally, for the rest of theirs. If they were even lucky enough to have survived.

My fist curled and I couldn't resist. I itched to see pain on his face, feel it from his every breath.

So I reached out and put my right hand over both of his that hovered over his crotch. Though it disgusted me to touch him, there was nothing that would stop me from my next move. I squeezed with all my strength.

Another wail as he tried to fight me but I was stronger.

“What’s the matter, Marco motherfucking King?” I taunted in a low, eerily voice as I cocked my head. I removed my hands off his crotch, letting him tend to the disgusting dick. “You can dish the pain, but you're too weak to take it?”

I smiled darkly as I patted down his pant legs. *Bingo!*

Knife holster. “I know how much you love your knives,” I purred with a dark smile. “Shall we start?” He grumbled something intelligible, still holding on to his family *jewels*. It was pointless, because he wouldn’t need them.

“I know; I know,” I drawled in a low voice, taking the knife out of his holster. “I can’t seem to shut up.”

My hand held the knife as my eyes traveled over his pathetic form. He was so sure of himself, he came here alone. No guard at the door. Just him and I. If I died today, at least I made the fucker pay. There would be no mercy for him. He never offered it to anyone else.

My hand darted out in a quick move and sliced the skin on his throat. The look of confusion on his face was priceless. It was just a surface cut, but enough to make him bleed like a pig that he was. Suddenly his groin was forgotten and his hands lifted to his neck, gripping his bleeding wound. A pained wheeze escaped him, and I couldn’t help but relish in his pain.

Maybe I was fucked up, but I actually enjoyed his groans, painful wheezing. I shifted my body, to ensure nobody could surprise me from behind. Though if I was a betting woman, I’d bet that nobody would come. There were way too many screams echoing down this godforsaken hallway.

“It’s good you already unbuckled your pants,” I continued in a dark tone as I pulled his pants and boxers further down his legs in one swift move.

I shoved a knife into his shoulder and another scream pierced the air. He stared up at me in surprised horror. It was the first time I’d done this. Usually I pulled the trigger, from a safe distance. From the far corner of my mind, I noticed his blood trickling down the handle of the knife and onto my hands, staining them red.

His blood will forever be on my hands.

The thought didn’t bother me. Not one bit. This earth would be a safer, better place without him.

“Okay, time to get to work,” I announced with a dark smile curving my lips. Maybe having my memories back flipped a switch in my brain. Or maybe I was just fucked up all along. I enjoyed this, seeing Marco motherfucking King in his vulnerable state.

He was a dead man and he knew it.

I took his dick into my one hand. “I bet you didn’t think I'd touch your dick like this,” I deadpanned in a cold voice. Truthfully, I didn’t want to touch him, but fuck if I’d let him get off easy. This was for every fucking woman he tortured, raped, killed or let walk this earth in her broken state.

He tried to scramble, shift backwards but I had a tight grip on his dick. “Don’t worry, Marco motherfucking King. I won’t let go of your dick.”

His hand reached out, his nail scraping against my cheek. I knew he got me, the sting instant. It was actually pathetic. He fought worse than a girl. At least women scratched better than that.

I yanked on his dick hard, forcing him to stop moving. He instantly yelped and cried out.

“Now, now, don’t cry,” I said as I placed the blade against the limp skin of his dick. “We are only getting started.”

Realization of what I was about to do sunk into his eyes and he attempted to kick me, saving his pathetic jewel. If you could even call that shriveled, disgusting thing a jewel.

His leg connected with my rib, but I didn’t flinch. Truthfully, he could break my ribs and I’d never let go of that dick of his. Instead I squeezed his dick so hard, he wheezed, then threw up. He attempted to turn to his side, but I forced him to remain still, my one hand on his dick. With my hand that clutched the knife, I brought it to his face and shoved it against his jaw, forcing him to swallow his bile.

“Now that’s a good boy,” I spat out.

Fuck, I could do this for hours and days to him. Degrade him. Punish him. Make him cry. Plead for mercy.

Of course, he'd never get any.

I twisted my hand and punched him against his cheekbone with the handle of my knife. I grinned watching the bruise form almost instantly. I wished I could record this and send it to all the women he hurt.

Bringing back my focus to his little member, limp between his legs, I grinned viciously.

"This little guy will never work again," I purred, meeting his gaze, relishing in the terror in his eyes. "You will never forget *my* name," I taunted. "For however short your life will be, you'll scream *my* name."

Then I sliced, the flesh of his cock splitting. I took my time, his screams shattering against the walls. I might end up deaf after this, but fuck it. It was so goddamn worth it.

His member was cut off too soon. Much to my dismay. He made women hurt for hours, taking turns with his men over and over, until they were raw and bleeding.

"Yeah, this was too quick," I murmured more to myself, discarding his cock into a corner. It landed with barely a thud.

He wailed but none of his pleading, screams or cries got to me. In my mind, I was in a dark room, lost to hate and brutality. It was time to dish it out.

"Stop it," he wailed, his bottom half of the torso gushing with blood. Interesting how much blood was in that little body member. "What do you want?"

I locked eyes with him. "One word," I said, digging my blade into his thigh. "To hear your screams."

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Chapter Forty-One

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CASSIO

The tracker led me to the hotel room in Kars. It was still dark outside, the city and everyone in this goddamn hotel sleeping. But my hunch had me dreading each step I took towards the tracker.

I knew something was wrong as I walked towards the room that supposedly held my wife even before I stormed into it. It took a fraction of a second to register what I was seeing. Luca and Alessio were behind me, but all my focus was on the empty room, tumbled sheets, and the bedside lamp knocked from the table. Evidence of struggle everywhere.

Red haze blurred my vision, the pressure in my chest tightened tenfold and detonated throughout every inch of my body, leaving a hole where my heart should be.

They took her.

The edges of my vision switched from red to black fury. In slow motion, I went through the room. Her little bag left open. Her phone on the floor. Her toiletries still in the bathroom. As I approached the bed, I picked up the lamp off the ground and that was when I saw it.

My wife’s wedding band.

I picked it up and tucked it into my pocket. Luca and Alessio both had their guns drawn but it was pointless. She

was gone.

“Put your guns away,” I told them. The last thing we needed was to waste time with the Turkish police.

They both tucked their guns back into the back of their jeans. We all dressed for combat. Out here, we were killers, hunters, whatever we needed to be. Not the head of our family. Those usually ruled from behind a desk.

Like Nonno. Like Vasili.

God damn it, I was fucking tired. I just wanted my wife, safe and sound with me. In our home. Was that too much to ask?

“Luca, see where her team is,” I ordered.

Chad gave us a location, but if we had to go into the compound to retrieve her, we’d need all the backup we could get. Whether those idiots liked it or not, they would help. Even if I had to point a gun to their heads as they helped.

“They are all here too,” Luca muttered.

“We should start with her right-hand man,” Alessio suggested. “Do you know which one is her go-to man?”

I growled and he instantly realized how it sounded. I knew what he meant. No, I fucking didn’t know who her right-hand man was. I should know; she should have fucking told me her reckless plan.

I dialed up Margaret. I didn't give a shit that it was the middle of the night in the States. She answered on the first ring. Good! She should be fucking worried about her cousin, for letting her go through with her reckless plan.

“Yes?” her voice came through the headset.

“Margaret, who is Áine’s right hand man?” I gritted out.

Images of the young red-haired girl, beaten black and blue, with shattering, broken blue eyes kept playing in my mind. It was like pouring salt over an open cut. It fucking hurt my chest to think of a single hair being hurt on her.

“John McAllister. He should be with her.”

I ended the call without another word. Otherwise, I could lose my shit and take it out on her. She was family by marriage, after all and starting shit with her now wouldn't do me any good.

“Check if there is anyone here by John McAllister,” I told Luca.

It took him a short moment to dig it up. “It’s the room two doors down.”

I grabbed Áine’s bag, stuffed her phone in it and we left the room, heading for John’s.

“Let me handle this,” Alessio suggested. “You are worked-up and this time, honey will work better.”

“And faster,” Luca chimed in, unhelpfully.

I looked at both of them and narrowed my eyes. Alessio was very much like Nico in aesthetic regards. He had a more clean cut look, though he was no less lethal. Just like my dear brother-in-law. Fuck with the ones he loved, and the psycho came out swiftly. I saw it firsthand.

I gave him a jerky nod. Sure, I’d stand in the background. Let fucker John say one wrong word and I’d give him *my* psychotic version.

Alessio knocked on the door. Waiting.

Quiet. No response. No movement. Nothing.

He knocked again and then followed up. “The Rose Rescue,” he shouted through the door.

Then we heard it. Grumbling. Feet against the door. The door swung open with an older man still in his boxers and gun in his hand.

His eyes roamed over us and locked on me. “Let me guess. Cassio King.”

“Are you sure this is it?” John asked for the hundredth time, grating my nerves. “It looks deserted.”

I chose to ignore him or risk just telling him off. The building was old, a fort with three corner towers built out of clay with certain sections crumbling. The place blended with the vast desert landscape around it. The temperature was rising as the hour advanced, and I knew eventually it would be scorching hot.

God, I hoped she was dressed warm when they took her. It clawed at me to think of her shivering at night, in the cold, in this rotten place. I couldn't even fathom anything else happening to her, otherwise I'd lose my shit.

This whole place reminded me of the building I found Áine in years ago. It probably dated back to the tenth century. When we were done with it, it would be part of the history, blown up to pieces.

"All these damn places look deserted," Luca muttered. "It is what makes them unnoticeable."

"Okay, you got a point," John admitted reluctantly. He pulled out a device out of his backpack and I watched him turn it on. I recognized it. It was a heat sensor to check for bodies in the compound. Not sure why he just didn't do that from the get go instead of blabbing away.

It took him a minute to set it up. Then I saw it, infrared bodies moving through the structure. *Bingo!*

If only there was a way to distinguish women from men and where Áine was.

"Shit," one of Áine's men muttered. Harry, if I remembered right. Or was it Pilot? What the fuck ever, it didn't matter. "We are seriously outnumbered."

Alessio, Luca, and I shared a glance. We knew it too. But waiting wasn't an option. An hour could make a big difference in a single life. Áine's life!

"We need to split up," I told them. "Three groups, three wings of the compound. Save women and children, kill the guards and their soldiers, bring everyone back here."

My eyes traveled over all the men to ensure they understood. Each one of them nodded.

“Sync up the watches,” I said. “Forty minutes. Our ride will be here, waiting for us.”

My only worry was whether the transportation would be big enough to accommodate enough victims. It was hard to tell whether there would be ten or fifty women. Split up three ways we proceeded into the compound; John and I ended up together heading towards the furthest part of the compound. We stuck to the shadows, taking advantage of the sun that wasn’t up yet.

Though it was close. The glimpses of the rising sun touched the sky far in the horizon.

We didn’t share any words, both of us on high alert. If I knew Marco, he’d keep Áine away from the other women. Cries echoed through the hallways, hitting me straight in the gut. It made my stomach churn.

A piercing man’s wail echoed along with them. I recognized it immediately. My heart twisted, like someone stabbed a knife into it, and I took off running without waiting for John.

As we ran down the rock corridor, a woman’s scream pierced through from the left and both of our steps faltered. It wasn’t Áine’s, but it was definitely a woman in distress.

“You go on,” John said, turning towards the door from which the scream came. “Get Áine and collect others on the way. We’ll meet outside as planned.”

I nodded and continued on. There was no time to waste. The stone walls were rough-cut and the chill seemed to linger in the air permanently. With each step, the cries became louder, and the only thing that kept my sanity was that the sounds belonged to a man. They weren’t Áine’s.

I got to the last door and looked through the small bar window. The scene that hit me was some gory stuff. A murder scene from a horror movie. And I’ve seen some shit.

Marco was sprawled on the dirt floor, his pants around his ankles, his dick discarded in the corner. There wasn't a single part of him clean. Blood covered every inch of his skin and soaking his clothes.

His ears were missing too. A few of his fingers scattered around the dirt floor. Some other body parts that looked like flesh.

My eyes went to my wife. Her bloodied hands matched her red mane, clutching a knife soaked in blood. Marco's blood! There was so much blood; I wasn't sure how he was still alive.

"One word, Marco motherfucking King," I heard her say, her voice cold and dark. And her smile, it was one I knew well. It was the same one I felt as I killed Chad. Or any other motherfucker that hurt people I loved. My wife stood there like a goddess of vengeance, in all her glory. "Just say one word," she taunted.

"Áine," I called out as I grabbed a key from the side and unlocked the door.

She whipped around, knife still clutched in her hand and her eyes wild. I knew the feeling. I lived through it. Seen it on my friends' faces. But somehow it never quite hit me like this. Seeing it on the woman I loved.

Marco whimpered on the floor, a pool of blood all around him. I didn't give a shit. He got better than he deserved. All I cared about was about my woman right here.

"It's okay, Butterfly," I told her in a hushed tone. "It's me. I came for you."

The wild look in her eyes slowly faded, bringing back her shimmering blues of the deepest oceans.

"Hunter?"

I smiled. "Yes, it's me." I extended my hand, asking silently for the knife. Her eyes flickered to my hand, then to the knife and back to Marco.

"He won't survive," I cooed. "You did good. But let me deal the final blow."

“Why?” Her voice was coarse, as if she just woke up from a nightmare.

“You are too good to deal with his death,” I said. “He doesn’t deserve your hands to give him that final blow.”

In an agonizingly slow move, she handed me the knife with shaky hands. “I made him scream,” she rasped, her voice trembling.

“You did good,” I told her. “Now, let’s save the other women.”

There was nothing more I wanted to do but to pull her to me into a hug. Fuck, I was scared whether she’d welcome it, unsure what she endured.

“Psycho bitch,” Marco grunted, his whole body a bloody mess. There were patches of skin missing off of him.

I pulled out my gun and pointed at my brother’s skull. “Nobody talks to my wife like that,” I hissed. He wasn’t worth any more of my time or Áine’s suffering.

He wasn’t worth it. Period.

Pulling the trigger, the bullet flew straight into his skull, killing him on the spot. And then for the safe measure, I put another two bullets into his skull and one straight into his black heart.

There would be no reincarnations of that weasel.

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Chapter Forty-Two

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ÁINE

He was dead.

I watched Marco's mutilated body with cold detachment. Maybe it was my coping mechanism. I didn't think so. I felt no regret for what I'd done to him. In a strange way, it felt satisfactory. To make him pay for the sins I'd known he'd done.

Shots and gunfire sounded in the distance, waking me up from my hazed vengeance state of mind. I met Cassio's gaze. My husband. *What will he think?*

Lowering my eyes, I noted what a state of a mess I was.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I looked up again and our gazes collided. I let myself drown in that dark gaze that in a strange way offered light and security. The memories and pain that hid in the fog. He was right, I needed them.

Maybe now, I'd start healing. Except, I didn't want to do it without him. I needed him for *me*. My heart thumped in my chest for him. It has ever since he rescued me. Amidst the pain and screams that my mind couldn't let go, it was always him reaching out to offer help. His hand in the fog offering the rose inked hand to pull me out.

"I love you," I rasped out. Amidst the blood and death, screams and pain, the words slipped out. It was the wrong time and the wrong place. I didn't care. "For years, I

couldn’t remember,” I muttered, twisting my bloodied hand over my wrist. “In my dreams, I’d hear shit but none of it made sense. But I’d remember your hand, reaching out. And when I thought I’d drown in the fog,” I uttered, my own voice choked with feelings that were suppressed for years, “… it was your hand pulling me out.”

“Áine-” he started but I cut him off.

“I know, I’m broken,” I muttered, sniffling, “and this… all of this is fucked up.” I extended my hands. We were surrounded by smeared blood and evidence of me going all Jack The Ripper on his half-brother. “But I-I can’t get my shit together without you.”

Hunter’s hand took my face into his palms and he pressed his lips on mine. “I love you too, Butterfly.” My eyes stung and I blinked hard. “You are not broken. And if we had time, I would have helped you skin Marco alive. Made him suffer for days.”

My lips curved into a smile. “That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“Do you know how many people I’ve killed?” he asked me. I shook my head. “Neither do I. Do you still love me?”

“I do,” I vowed.

“As I love you.” He pressed a kiss on the tip of my nose. “But from now on, we will do everything together.”

I nodded. “Are you okay to walk?”

His eyes roamed my body, the worry in them. But I was more than fine. “Yes, he didn’t do anything to me,” I told him. “He laid on top of me and I kicked him, then I-” There was no need to explain what I did after that. The picture was painted perfectly around us with his body parts scattered around us and blood pooling all around.

“Let’s go save other women and get the fuck out of here.” My husband’s suggestion sounded like heaven to me.

It took about ten steps out of the cell and the explosion shook the ground, making both of us fall to our knees. The

ground was hard against my knees but I ignored the pain. Sharing a glance, we stood up and continued running, my feet bare against the dirt floors. None of it mattered though. I knew without a doubt we would get out of here.

Because my husband was here.

We rushed towards the cell, closest to us and fumbled with the door lock. The second we opened the door, cries and whimpers echoed. There were four women, cuddled together. The fear on their face hit me right in the gut.

I looked like shit, blood on my hands, all over me, including my pajamas. But it was better I approached them than Hunter, considering what they probably went through.

I rushed to them. “It’s okay. We are here to help.” They eyed me warily but we had no time. “Please, we have to hurry.”

I nudged them all towards the door while Hunter kept watch with a handgun in his hand. Rounded up, we continued to the next cell. And the next. There were twenty of us at the end of the section of the compound when Hunter nudged us outside.

“Hold on,” I stopped him. “There are probably more women on the other two sides.”

“Others are taking care of it,” he assured me.

“Others?”

“Your men, Luca, and Alessio.”

“They won’t leave anyone behind?” I questioned him.

The way the sun hit his dark eyes and they glistened as they watched me like I was the most important thing in this world.

“I promise, Butterfly,” he murmured softly. “No troll left behind.”

My heart tripped. Those were the same words I told Margaret the night I ran into him. The night that kick-started this journey to him. The love I had for him swelled, and I was sure it glowed right through me. It fucking shone bright, and it felt right.

“I love you so fucking much,” I told him, pressing my lips to his.

“Love you more,” he murmured against my lips.

Without another word, we continued out of the compound. I could see in the distance a group of women. It must be where we were going. Twenty minutes later, we loaded the last girl from the compound into the large van, and all the while Cassio, John, Alessio, and Luca stood behind us, watching our backs.

“Five minutes before this place blows to shit,” Alessio warned and we all loaded into the van.

Right on the dot, five minutes later the ground shook with the loud explosion and I watched in the passenger mirror as flames engulfed high up into the sky and over the desert.

The past burned right alongside it.

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Chapter Forty-Three

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CASSIO

Seeing my wife endanger herself took years off my life. I meant what I said though. From now on, we *would* do everything together. The best way to protect her was to keep her informed. I should have offered her the information I had and she wouldn't have made the decision to go after Marco alone.

I would give her my all, and I'd demand her all.

"Do we know where we're going?" she asked me, leaning her head against my shoulder. She looked tired, exhausted in fact. Luca and Alessio kept throwing glances my way wondering if she was alright. The blood on her made it seem she was injured but she wasn't. It was all Marco's.

I nodded, assuring them she was fine.

Otherwise, I'd be staying behind on that compound, making every single one of those men scream for days. Áine's torture method to Marco would be nothing compared to mine.

She was all that mattered to me.

"So which way is somewhere safe?" Her soft voice was like a velvet, caressing my skin and pulling me out of my dark thoughts.

“I have a house an hour or so from here,” I told her. “We’ll be safe there. And we can get the women to a shelter from there.”

She darted her eyes to Alessio and Luca. “Thank you for helping.”

“Always,” they both uttered in unison. “You are family.”

My hand was wrapped around her shoulder and I pulled her tighter into me.

She was *home*.

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Chapter Forty-Four

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ÁINE

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Three months later

The Cathedral of Cefalù was the oldest church in Sicily. The church was beautiful; the town even more so. We've been here for a week, and I could see myself staying forever. Much to Nonno's happiness. He'd already hinted for grandchildren and built us a villa on his vast property.

So Cassio and I can have privacy, he said.

Privacy and Italian people did not go hand-in-hand. I didn't mind. I loved their wholehearted laughter, their wine and many siestas. Beautiful red roses were everywhere on this island, the warm breeze mixing their scent with the sea. It made me feel at home. Terracotta-capped, whitewashed houses of this town down the cobbled streets and white sandy beaches made it a perfect place to raise a family. And it didn't hurt that DiMauro mafiosos were part of my family. It made it even safer.

Nonno DiMauro sat in front of the church, his eyes on me as I walked down the aisle covered in red rose petals towards my husband.

My husband.

We've been married for three months now and each day brought more happiness. More memories to replace the old ones. As far as I was concerned, there wasn't a single man

on this planet worth more than Cassio Hunter King. He was his mother's son, Nonno's grandson.

I glanced down at my wedding gown that moved with my body. It was perfect, form-fitting to my slim body, sleeveless and with a low-cut back. My hair was pulled up in a bun, leaving my neck and birthmark open.

For *him.*

My hands trembled with all the emotions. It felt overwhelmingly scary to have so much to lose. Life without him would be just empty living. We lived together, fought the enemies hard, and loved each other even harder.

His closest friends helped with The Rose Rescue. In truth, they have been saving the victims right alongside us for years. We just didn't know it. We welcomed the help. After all, we were stronger together. With Benito and Marco gone, the threats to the innocents weren't gone.

Different day; different villain.

The one thing we all agreed on was we keep The Rose Rescue a secret. Nobody would know; not even my own parents.

Mom sat in the front too, smiling with watery eyes. Everyone was here. Everyone we loved and cared about.

My family and friends.

His family and friends.

Our family and friends.

It felt like a long and winding road, but it was all worth it. Something perfect and wonderful came from something ugly and evil, and I thanked God and all the Saints for *him* every day.

Everyone watched me take my steps towards the future head of DiMauro mafia. None of their eyes mattered to me. Only his.

The sunlight came through the stained glass windows, throwing a multitude of colors against the thousand year old stone and throwing lights against the tiny crystals weaved into my dress.

“I’m happy you found this,” Dad murmured right before we made it to the altar.

“Love you, Dad,” I whispered. Emotions flickered across his face and his eyes shimmered. It was the first time I called him Dad. It was long overdue. He lifted my veil and placed a soft kiss on my cheek before handing me to my future.

Two of us together.

Whatever the future brought.

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EPILOGUE

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Cassio

The Vitales' backyard was draped in silence, the only thing breaking it were the words of the priest and soft cooing of babies. Luciano's baby girl. Nico's baby twin boys.

Every so often the little mischievous sounds traveled over the soft breeze. It belonged to my twin nieces and Matteo. No doubt scheming to rob a jewelry store or plan a wedding. We'd have our hands full when our children grow up.

Our children.

My eyes sought out the familiar ember flamed mane. Áine held Margaret's little one in her arms, cooing and whispering soft words. The little one was literally fresh out of the oven, a tad bit too early. But nothing could hold Margaret back from attending a party - even an innocent party like the christening. Margaret hovered over her newborn too. Luca eyed all three of them.

My wife was a lioness when it came to protecting those she loved. My friends and I were vicious in protecting our family, but Áine, my sister, and Grace weren't any less brutal when it came to protecting it too. All of us, together, made a good team.

My wife's gaze met mine and the entire world faded into the background, leaving me alone with the woman I loved.

She wore a light blue dress that made her eyes even more stunning. Each time the breeze swept over the backyard, her dress hugged her body, displaying her little bump.

We were barely into the second trimester. We'd be starting our own family very soon now. The thought of anything happening to her or our unborn child terrified me. I'd already started re-evaluating security and protection. My lovely wife chuckled and warned me I was going overboard. Maybe, though it didn't stop me. I wanted to preserve this… this family we all worked so hard for.

The fear of losing any of it was real.

Nonno and Mr. Vitale assured me that was a good feeling. It meant we all had a lot to lose and would remain vigilant in protecting it.

"Godfather, may you please approach," the priest's voice echoed through the backyard of Luciano's house and pulled me back to the task at hand.

Grace smiled as she handed me her daughter, the little, three-month-old bundle of joy too small in my arms. Little Francesca never even opened her eyes. Fuck, I hoped she remained sleeping. Probably safest so I wouldn't risk breaking her if she wiggled. Luciano would beat the shit out of me.

"Protect my baby," Grace teased softly.

Goddamn it. My wife's hormones skipped her and went to me. I swallowed hard.

"With my life," I promised.

Minutes ticked and the baby remained sleeping as the priest recited the final verses of the blessing. Grace's eyes remained on her baby girl, while Luciano watched his wife.

"May almighty God, the Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit bless you Francesca Aria Vitale."

The cheers followed, but I couldn't peel my eyes from little Francesca's tiny body, cuddled into my chest. Whoever thought all those years ago, we'd all end up here.

With the women we loved. Our children. The future smiling at us, finally promising light and happiness.

A snap of the camera had me lifting my head. “Don’t wake up the baby,” I whispered the warning in a hushed tone. It was Luciano’s father who grinned, making him look younger than I remembered seeing him in a very long time.

“You’ll be a good father, Cassio,” he patted me gently on the shoulder and carried on. It was the only downfall of having a big family - nothing ever remained a secret. We tried to keep it to ourselves for another few weeks.

Luca must have blabbed his big mouth and told everyone, I mused but a smile still played on my lips.

“How is pappa bear?” My wife’s voice reached me. I pulled her with my free hand over and pressed a kiss onto her forehead. She must have given the baby back to Margaret.

“More important question is how is mamma bear?” I asked her back.

Áine’s fingers brushed over Francesca’s cheek, her touch featherlight. “I can’t wait until our baby comes,” she murmured softly. “We have the best family waiting for him.”

“Him, huh?” I teased. My wife was certain we were having a boy.

“Yep, him.” Her shining ocean pools met my gaze. Nothing measured to seeing her happy. It was the best drug a husband could get. “And then we’ll have a girl. Maybe a few more boys.”

I grinned. “How many kids are we planning on?”

“I was thinking like four, maybe five,” she mused, teasing. “We’ll have to beat Bianca’s score.”

I followed her eyes to see Nico and Bianca sneaking away, my brother-in-law's hand already on my sister’s ass. I didn’t even want to guess where they were heading or what they planned to do.

I chuckled. “I’m up for a challenge. Though, we’ll have to ask her to play fair and stop producing twins.”

My wife’s soft laugh rang out and I couldn’t resist leaning towards her, nipping her earlobe.

“I love you so goddamn much, Vita Mia.” I never tired of saying those words. “My butterfly. Until the day I take my last breath and red roses cover my grave, I’ll be yours.”

“And I love you, Cassio Hunter King,” she whispered softly. “Not a single day goes by without me thanking all the saints for bringing you to me and making you mine. We will have each other in life and death. Because there is nowhere you will go that I won’t follow. You are a man worth loving, and I am the lucky one here.”

Fuck! The words my wife could speak could bring me to my knees.

“Together,” we both whispered, our foreheads connected. “Forever.”

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PREVIEW OF BELLES & MOBSTERS: ALEXEI

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Aurora

There has to be another way, I thought for the millionth time.

My heels clicked against the pavement of the dark alleyway. It was creepy, and I'd feel uncomfortable walking down it without my gun or Alexei. Though I'd never admit that to the cold, stoic asshole next to me.

An unassuming location and a plain building. You'd never guess there was a kinky sex club off this quiet, dark street. A large, brick house two stories tall, the place dark and quiet. There were no cars around and no traffic. It reminded me of a dead end, the dingy alley street in horror movies, where serial killers took their victims to torture, rape, or kill.

A cold shiver ran down my spine; the eerie quiet of the night broken up only by the barely coordinated clacking of my heels. I was still unclear what the expectation would be once we entered through the club door.

"We didn't even practice," I muttered under my breath, my heart thundering nervously. I'd felt better going into combat, not to a fucking sex club. "Are you sure there isn't a better way?" I hissed sotto voce.

I was losing my shit and freaking out while Alexei Nikolaev acted like we were going for ice cream. *Icicles*

more like it, I thought wryly. The man never showed any damn emotions.

"Yes." His answer was short, curt. No surprise there. Man barely spoke and was cold as ice. Stoic as a damn statue.

I didn't feel comfortable with this plan. There was talk of possibly performing to fool them. *Performing!* I wasn't a performer for fucking sake. I was an FBI agent. I never dreamt going to sex club to be part of my job. But here we were, on our way to it.

But I couldn't let the chance at capturing Ivan Petrov slip through my fingers. He was my case. And supposedly there was a man that ran this joint who would be our ticket to get to him. We had to gain Igor's attention! Some fucker who was in Ivan's favor.

Wrapping my arms around my waist, I gripped at the silky material of my short, red minidress. The top of the dress fit me like a corset and was by far the tightest thing I had ever worn. Each time I took a breath in and released it, I was sure my boobs would burst out of it. The dress was short, too short for my liking, and clung to every curve of my body. I combined it with a pair of red pumps.

I didn't pick any of it; it came with the assignment. Courtesy of Alexei bloody Nikolaev. I'd rather take the fucking heels and throw them at his pretty face.

How a man so bleak, so cold, could pick something so bold was beyond me! But then, it wasn't him wearing this shit. It was me.

We walked side by side, his steps slower to allow me to keep tempo in my heels. It was the first time I've seen him in a suit. Usually, he wore his black cargo pants, plain black shirts, and combat boots. I didn't like the man and his physical appearance wasn't something I'd take notice of... usually. Yet, today, it was harder than normal.

Fuck. This. Shit.

My ankle quivered as I took a wrong step, and I almost lost my balance. But before I could stumble, his inked hand wrapped around my upper arm and caught me. My eyes shot to where his touch seared my skin, sending hot waves through my blood.

My eyes snapped to his face. The same stoic, unmoving expression. Same frigid, pale blue eyes. It was the first time he'd touched me. I focused on his body disturbingly close to mine; so close that I could smell his cologne. An odd mixture of citrus and pine. It actually smelled very nice.

I swallowed hard. "Thanks," I murmured softly, my voice slightly breathless. How was it possible that such a searing, suffocating heat could come off such a frigid person?

No response. Barely a nod.

We continued, our steps slightly slower. *Clack. Clack. Clack*

It took another ten steps before we stopped in front of the discrete black door. A fleeting glance my way by those pale blue eyes, and I swallowed the lump in my throat. If it didn't bother him; it didn't bother me either.

A jerky nod by me and he knocked on the door. One. Two. Three.

"One more," I rasped. He cocked his eyebrow. "Three is bad luck," I explained.

He knocked one more time and the door swung open the next instance.

In front of us was a woman dressed in an extravagant, black cocktail gown. Everything on her was exactly right - from her form-fitting dress, her jewelry, make-up, down to her shoes. It was all perfect.

Her brown eyes locked on Alexei. Desire flickered in them. And recognition!

I threw a side glance in his direction, wondering how often this man actually came here. Returning my eyes to the woman, I found her eyes on me, assessing me. She nodded and stepped back to let us in.

Alexei's hand came to my lower back, his touch burning through the material of my dress as he nudged me. *I don't like this*, my mind kept repeating over and over again. My steps were hesitant as I moved forward, but there was no going back now. The door shut behind us with a thud and my heart raced faster.

I scanned the room with each step. The walls were painted black, yet the reception area was marble white, making the contrast stark.

"Welcome to the Eve's Apple," the woman purred, her eyes hungry on Alexei. And her smile! It was so bright, it might power the entire club.

A strangled laugh bubbled in my throat, but I quickly swallowed it. *That fucking name is so goddamn stupid!*

Alexei's big hand on the small of my back nudged me forward. I took a step, heading toward a hallway with burgundy walls and a mirror ceiling. The dim lights gave it some serious porn set vibes.

We kept on walking until we made it to the end of the hallway, which opened up to a large room with a bar to the right. The room was painted black and had dark crimson accents, from thick oriental rugs hanging off the walls to the red marble floors to the crystal chandelier hanging off the ceiling.

My eyes traveled over the people in the room. They were mingling, men's eyes hungry on women, as if they were shopping.

"Drink?" Alexei's frigid voice brought my attention back to him. I nodded, when in fact I just wanted to shout, *"FBI motherfuckers, where is this goddamn Igor?"*

We walked through the crowds, and it was impossible not to notice the leers from women and men alike. Despite my dislike of Alexei, I found myself stepping closer to him. I didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea, and he better not get a bright idea and leave me alone for a bloody second.

As we sat down on the barstools, he signaled the barista.

“Vodka spritz for the lady and Cognac for me.” Alexei’s voice was disinterested and cold, with a hint of timbre. My eyes fleeted to his, that little scar on his lip somehow fascinating. I often wondered how he got it.

The moment the drinks were brought, I reached for mine like a lifeline and took a gulp of it. I’d need it tonight. I glanced around the room and suddenly felt Alexei’s lips against my earlobe.

“No eye contact.” His breath was hot against my skin. “Otherwise, it’s an invitation.”

My eyes widened, and I immediately returned my gaze to him. We were here as a supposed couple. That was bad enough; I wasn’t interested in inviting any additional attention from other men.

Another drink was placed in front of me.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” I muttered under my breath. I gulped down my second drink. Before I could even open my mouth, a third drink was placed in front of me. I didn’t grab it; otherwise, I’d be on my way to getting drunk.

“Alexei Nikolaev.” A heavily accented voice came from behind us, a big hand landing on my shoulder. I flinched at the unfamiliar touch.

Alexei uttered something in Russian, his voice unmoving and the cold tenor in his voice unmistakable. A shiver ghosted down my spine. Before I could blink, the man’s hand fell from my shoulder.

“Are you enjoying the club?” The man asked us both, but his eyes never wavered from me. He was leering at me and not even trying to hide it.

I cleared my throat. “It’s great,” I answered, forcing a smile.

Alexei stood unmoving, his eyes locked on the man with professional disinterest.

“Introduce us, Alexei.”

“Aurora. Igor.” The way my name rolled off Alexei’s lips did something to me.

His look gave me the creeps. Igor the Peeper was pretty much undressing me with his eyes. Alexei must have seen the same because his hand came to rest on my thigh, and his heat made me shiver with excitement.

Wait. What?

“Would you like a tour, Aurora?” Igor offered, his eyes never leaving me.

My hand covered Alexei’s and I patted it awkwardly. “Ah, thank you. Alexei already offered.” I smiled sweetly. At least I hoped it was a passable, sweet smile.

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Who was this Igor? Something about him rubbed me the wrong way. I went through Ivan Petrov’s file in my head and I didn’t recall the name Igor nor his face in the records.

According to the Nikolaev men, Igor was our ticket to get to Ivan Petrov. Supposedly part of Ivan Petrov’s inner circle. The part that concerned me was that I didn’t know the connection between the Nikolaev men and *this* guy. The FBI had never even heard of him.

Granted, I had only recently got this case and I suspected it was because I was the only woman under the age of thirty that wasn’t married. My tender age of twenty-five usually worked against me, until they needed someone for a sex club. Fuckers!

I scanned over Igor memorizing his features. I’d go through the FBI database later and see if I could get any kind of match. His hair was dark, cut short and military style. He wasn’t bad looking, until you locked eyes with him. His eyes were dark, almost black and something unnerving in his gaze that didn’t quite sit well with me.

Then I remembered what Alexei said. *Do not make eye contact, otherwise it was an invitation.*

I immediately turned my head and focused on Alexei’s hard face. Those cold eyes could freeze back our melting polar ice caps.

“I have a VIP room ready for you,” Igor added, breaking a slightly tense, uncomfortable silence. Alexei Nikolaev was more than okay with the silence. Me, not so much. It drove me fucking nuts. Growing up in a big home, with four brothers, it was never quiet. You could hide in the bathroom and you’d still not get privacy.

“Do svidaniya.” Alexei dismissed Igor with one word. Or was it two in Russian?

With a final flicker of his eyes my way, Igor scurried along. I watched him disappear among the people through the dance floor in the center. On each corner of the dance floor, there was a small elevated platform with a naked dancer shaking her body like her life depended on it.

Several couples sat in lounges on the edge of the dance floor, watching women and men dance. I followed their gaze and my eyeballs just about popped out of my head. She lifted her dress up to her waist, flashing everyone with her bare ass.

I turned to Alexei to see if he’d noticed it too, but there was no reaction on his face. His inked face with that unusual blonde hair and those pale blue eyes was an unmoving mask. Just like his brother, Vasili Nikolaev, Alexei had this darkness ooze from every pore of his body.

“Who’s that guy?” I asked Alexei.

“Nobody good.”

I nodded slightly, keeping our talk to a minimum. Awareness trickled down my spine and the atmosphere thickened. A group of men came to the bar, their tones hushed and their eyes on me. I felt like prey, open for their hunting.

“VIP room. Now.” Okay, maybe Alexei wouldn’t allow an open season on my ass. His voice was cold, dark; a tone that made me wonder what his true story was. All I knew was what his file said, but somehow I had a feeling there was so much more.

Though, it wasn’t something I should concern myself with.

He stood up, offering me his hand. I took it, without a remark and we strolled past all the gawking men and women. It didn’t escape me that there were men swooning after my date.

No, not my date, I quickly corrected myself.

Alexei led me down the short hallway and then through the doorway. To our VIP suite. The room had glossy, black marble floors, three red velvet walls, and one entire wall with two-way glass.

There was the St. Andrew’s cross mounted to one wall and I swallowed a breath, my eyes flickering to the stoic man behind me.

“Don’t even fucking think about it,” I warned, my voice trembling.

“Relax.” His one word answers were driving me fucking nuts. I was falling apart here and this guy… nothing. Nada. Zip.

My gaze shifted to the rest of the room, hoping to settle my nerves. There was one black chair with a golden wooden frame, facing the window that overlooked the stage. I watched him unbutton his jacket, then take it off, tossing it carelessly onto the side table.

He sat in the chair, looking like a king. Nervously, I shifted from one foot to the other. Where was I supposed to be sitting? The dimmed lights gave this whole situation a bow-chick-a-wow-wow vibe.

“Sit.” One word command, in his indifferent voice and yet, it sent shivers down my spine.

“Where?” I choked out.

No answer. He probably thought me stupid. This was a couple’s club, as it was explained to me. Closeness was expected.

I took a step towards him. And another one. I turned around, slowly like in the haze, and sat down onto his lap.

With my back stiff, my eyes flickered out the window and locked with a dark, piercing gaze. Igor!

“He’s watching,” I muttered under my breath.

“Da.” Fuck, his Russian voice was sexier than English voice.

Two heartbeats, and his hands came to my waist. He squeezed just tight enough, tempting me to turn around to see his face. Though I knew I wouldn’t find anything there. This man was too good at hiding behind his mask.

His hands slid down my waist and my thighs. Goosebumps broke over my skin, and I clamped my teeth to hold in my moan. Alexei was the coldest man I had ever met, a criminal. Then why did my body burn? I felt like I was on fire, the feel of Alexei’s hard body behind me made the ache pulse between my thighs.

This is just for show, I reminded myself. We had to give the impression of being a real couple. But his touch was real, too real. I focused my eyes outside the window, where two men and a woman gave us a front row show.

I watched the two men touch the blonde woman like their lives depended on her, my eyes fixated on the three of them. Her skirt was bunched around her waist, her one shoulder strap off, exposing her one breast. The men’s hands were all over her, hungry and rough. The expression on her face was that of pure bliss. Blood in my veins burned like an inferno; my skin buzzed with an unfamiliar sensation. I couldn’t breathe, the air too thick, my lungs too tight.

In one thrust, one of the men entered her and the woman's moan vibrated through the glass. My soft gasp echoed through the dark space. Electricity crackled in the room and my mouth went dry as I watched her.

Her palms flattened against the glass. *Jesus, they should get a room, not do it out in the open,* I thought to myself. Though the purpose of the sex club was to do it in the open. God help me out of this mess!

Her moans became piercing, I heard them loud and clear from here. One of the men wrapped his hand around her, his fingers pinching her nipple and her breathy whimper traveled over. I swore I had felt the pinch myself.

I shifted, trying to get comfortable, feeling too hot for my own good. Then I shifted again, my ass grinding slightly against Alexei and I froze.

Alexei was hard.

My head snapped back to his face. Nothing but the same expression met mine. My heart pounded against my ribcage, my breathing labored and this man showed nothing. No emotion. No flicker of desire.

Except he is hard. The thought pierced through my desire infused brain.

All thoughts evaporated from my brain, leaving me only with this flame of lust that licked at my skin. I shifted on his lap and a flicker of depraved hunger flashed in his eyes. Flames in his pale blue gaze that threatened to swallow me.

Then he snapped. One second I was sitting on his lap, the next my palms against the window, bent over with my ass up in the air.

Alexei

I was so fucking hard, my cock strained against her ass. The moment she ground against it, my control snapped. My blood roared in my brain and rushed straight to my groin. I *fucking* snapped.

Bending her over, her palms braced against the glass, my hands pushed her red dress up, baring her ass to my view. The woman wore the tiniest string I had ever seen. I pressed my body against hers so she could feel my cock against the soft curve of her ass.

Pressing my lips to her fragile neck, I enjoyed her soft skin, the racing pulse beneath my mouth. Licking the skin

over her collarbone, I brought my palms to her round ass.

“Ready?” I asked. A small whimper escaped her mouth, her breathing labored.

She glanced over her shoulder, our eyes connecting. Those deep, warm brown eyes. The color of chocolate. She smelled like chocolate too.

“Ready, kroshka?” It was her last chance to stop me.

“Y-yes.” Her voice was breathy, her lips red pouty, and her eyes hazed with lust. Fuck if I knew whether it was for me or what she saw that threesome couple do.

The petite, dark-haired FBI agent was full of surprises. I shouldn’t take it too far. Everything that touched me ended up broken. Everything I touched ended up ruined. *Filthy.*

But unless we played this right, Igor would rat us out and our ticket to Ivan would go to fucking hell. The way he leered at her pissed me off. It sent cold fury down my spine and made me want to murder him.

Aurora was *mine*. Her mouth, though, wouldn’t be. I didn’t kiss. Her breasts. Her ass. Her pussy. All fucking mine.

I reached around and parted her thighs, pushing the flimsy material aside and sliding my finger past her folds. She was soaked. So fucking wet that my fingers were drenched within seconds.

God help me, but she was intoxicating and maddening at the same fucking time. Unlike anyone I had ever met before.

Even her arousal smelled like chocolate, like a drug you inhaled and forever remained in your system. I pushed my fingers deeper in and her pussy clenched around my fingers. Her head fell backwards, her eyes watching me over her shoulder, through her heavy eyelids and her cheeks flushed.

With my free hand, I fisted her hair and tugged it backwards, aware others from the club were watching. Except they could barely see, only the outline of us because

I dimmed the lights just right to ensure they couldn’t see us clearly.

Her pussy kept clenching around my fingers, eager for more as I thrust my fingers in and out. Her moans grew louder, her ass pushing against me. Then without warning, I retreated my fingers and brought them to her mouth. Without my asking, her lips parted and she sucked them clean.

Fucking beautiful!

Still gripping her hair with one hand, I unbuckled my pants, pushed her thong aside, then slid my rock-hard cock along her hot folds, then slammed into her. She was tight, her pussy clenching around my cock like a stronghold. Her moans vibrated straight to my chest as I fucked her hard. For the past two weeks, ever since she opened her sassy, smart mouth, this was all I wanted, and it was better than I envisioned.

She felt like heaven. My own personal heaven that I had no right to, but I stole a taste of it anyhow. All my control disintegrated as I fucked her hard and relentless. She matched each one of my thrusts with a whimper.

I worried I’d break her, forcing myself to ease up when her low warning growl had me spurring on.

“More.” I was more than happy to oblige, picking up my pace and pounding into her mercilessly. Her soft moans turned into gasping, urgent cries. She was close. I felt it as if it was my own orgasm. I turned her head so I could see her face as she shattered with pleasure. For me.

Her dark eyes glazed with desire, her mouth parted, and I fucked her faster and deeper until I felt her fall apart, her pussy milking me for all I had. She was fucking gorgeous.

A shudder rippled down my spine and I blew my load right into her tight, hot pussy, and the most powerful orgasm of my life cut through me.

Fuck. Me.

Her body slumped back into me, as if she sought out comfort from me. Little did she know, I only brought havoc. Never comfort.

I used my hand to turn her head towards me, and for the first time in my life, I was tempted to kiss a woman. Not a woman; this woman.

She must have felt the same urge, because her eyes lingered on my mouth.

I was fucked. *So fucked!*

*** To Be Continued ***

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